SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

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INDIA'S LARGEST ENGLISH NEWSPAPER

MARCH 15, 2026 | METRO | PAGES 40 | INCLUDING BANGALORE TIMES

Union home minister **Amit Shah says BJP will contest alone in Punjab**, urges people to give BJP 'ik mauka' and promises that the party's **first legislation would be an anti-conversion bill**. Also vows to rid state of drugs, **P 5**

Investors in a deal to create a US-controlled TikTok are set to pay **$10bn 'transaction fee' to American govt** for its role in helping create the arrangement

Rahul Gandhi says govt hasn't honoured promises it made to farmers, including on MSP, and is prepared to sacrifice India's agriculture for its own interests

'As a bowler, I always thought out of the box,' Sachin Tendulkar tells **TOI** about his 3 wickets that turned the Eden Gardens Test on Day 5 in 2001. **Sourav Ganguly** admits: 'When I saw **being late** agitated Waugh, it **became a tactic'**, **P 10, Other bk**

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DOUBLE DELIGHT

Today's issue of **TOI** is organised in two sections, both equally packed with news and analysis.
To get the full reading experience of today's edition, make sure you don't miss the other section

OTHER BOOK TOP STORIES

➤ **'Hisab liya jayega,' PM calls for change at Bengal poll rally**
➤ **Homemaker's role cant be overlooked, rules K'taka HC**
➤ **4-fold rise in underage driving cases in Bengaluru**

Wangchuk freed as govt revokes NSA detention

Activist Walks Out Of Jodhpur Jail After 6 Mths

Ajay Parmar & Bharti Jain

Jodhpur/New Delhi: Ladakh social and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk was released from Jodhpur Central Jail Saturday afternoon after the Centre revoked his detention under the National Security Act. His release comes almost six months after he was detained on Sept 26, 2025, two days after protests had broken out in the region while he was on a hunger strike seeking statehood and Sixth Schedule status for Ladakh. Police had opened fire on protesters, killing four people and injuring over 80.

Wangchuk left prison in the company of his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, who had arrived Saturday morning to receive him. Ratanada SHO Dinesh Lakhawat said police escorted the couple, who were in a private vehicle, out of the prison premises at about 1.30pm.

A Union home ministry statement had earlier announced the Centre's decision to rescind his detention "with immediate effect", citing its commitment to "fostering an environment of peace, stability and mutual trust in Ladakh so as to facilitate constructive and meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders".

The end of Wangchuk's incarceration six months short of the permissible detention period under NSA comes ahead of a March 16 protest called by Ladakh Apex Body to press for resumption of dialogue with the Centre on constitutional and other safeguards.

▶**Related reports, P 8**

3 DAYS BEFORE NEXT HEARING IN SC

➤ Move **expected to placate Ladakh Apex Body**, which had complained that no follow-up talks were scheduled to take the dialogue forward after Feb

➤ Decision comes 3 days before next hearing in Supreme Court on petition filed by Wangchuk's wife challenging his imprisonment

➤ Govt says it has been **actively engaging with various stakeholders** and community figures in Ladakh

➤ LG V K Saxena describes decision as a **'positive step' towards peace**, mutual trust

➤ Raj ex-CM Ashok Gehlot asks, 'Who'll account for 170 days of detention?'. J&K CM Omar Abdullah says he **should've never been arrested**

Boy, 4, killed in Manipur blast, father wounded

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Guwahati: A four-year-old boy was killed and his father injured in a freak blast in Manipur's Noney district on Saturday.

Police said the two were clearing bushes outside their house in Khoupum area's Taolingpung village when the explosion occurred, underscoring the hidden perils of the long ethnic conflict in the state.

"The bomb, lying in the bushes, went off when they struck it accidentally," an officer said. A case has been filed and investigations are on to trace the origin of the explosive, police said.

The father, aged 40, has been admitted with serious injuries to an Imphal hospital, around 95km away. The blast shocked the local community, with residents demanding swift action to ensure safety in the strife-scarred region.

Out of Hormuz: 2 ships with 93k tonnes LPG head for Guj

Enough For 68L Cylinders; India Needs 55L Daily

Dipak Dash & Atul Mathur

New Delhi: Two Indian ships carrying 92,700 tonnes of LPG — equivalent to 1.25 days of India's cooking gas demand — have crossed the Strait of Hormuz, blocked by Iran for a fortnight, and are scheduled to reach Indian ports on Monday and Tuesday. Another 10 ships carrying crude and gas remain on standby in the Persian Gulf.

Although it is still early days, the movement of the ships — Shivalik and Nandadevi — towards Mundra and Kandla signals easing of curbs in the war-torn corridor amid India's efforts to intensify engagement with Iran that included PM Modi's conversation with President Masoud Pezeshkian Thursday.

Indian authorities are in contact with govts in West Asia and are coordinating with them to ensure safe passage of the ships, a top official said on Saturday. The LPG in transit on the two ships can fill around 68 lakh cylinders, against average daily demand of 55 lakh.

"As a result of multiple contacts with all concerned, some ships destined for India have been able to cross the Strait of Hormuz... Several remain on standby in Gulf region," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

▶**Continued on P 3, Other Bk**

FULL COVERAGE
P 2, Other Bk 3, INSIDE JKT
▶**Iran min: US bullied India on Russian oil, Other Bk P3**

HAVE PNG? NO LPG REFILL, SAYS GOVT

Photo: IANS

Customers secure their cylinders while waiting for a refill in Noida on Saturday

➤ Govt tweaks supply rules, says consumers with PNG connections won't be allowed to retain, obtain or refill LPG cylinders | **P 3, Other Bk**
➤ India has **adequate stock of fertilisers, especially for kharif season**, says MEA spokesperson | **P 3, Other Bk**
➤ **Power limits stall switch to induction cooking** at Bengaluru eateries | **P 2**
➤ **Delhi caterers** struggle with LPG shortage. Trim menus, **turn to firewood and coal**, downsize staff
➤ Hotels and eateries that switch to electric stoves in

TN to get ₹**2 subsidy on every unit of power additionally consumed** | **P 3, Other Bk**

➤ **Navy warships** deployed off Gulf region for Op Sankalp **keeping watch on India-bound cargo vessels** leaving Hormuz | **P 3, Other Bk**

US bombs Iran island, threatens to hit oil infra if Strait blocked for ships

The US struck military sites on Kharg Island, from which Iran exports almost all its oil, for the first time overnight, upping the ante in a West Asia war that's raged for more than two weeks and shows little sign of easing.

President Donald Trump said military facilities on the 8-km long coral island in the Persian Gulf had been "obliterated", adding that he chose not to hit oil infrastructure "for reasons of decency". He threatened to do just that should Iran "do anything to interfere with the free and safe passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz".

Iran reacted by warning it will target American-linked oil and energy facilities in West Asia if its own petroleum infrastructure is attacked. Iranian media said all oil-industry workers on the island, which sits about 25-30km off the mainland, are safe and unharmed. AGENCIES

▶**See INSIDE JACKET**

Hamas urges Iran not to target neighbours

In its first such public appeal, Hamas has called on "our brothers in Iran" not to target neighbouring countries, while reaffirming Tehran's right to respond to the US-Israeli attacks. The Palestinian militant group also called on all countries in the region and international organisations to immediately stop the war. **INSIDE JACKET**

TDP MP, 2 ex-MLAs held in drug bust

TDP MP Putta Mahesh Kumar from Andhra Pradesh, ex-MLA Pilot Rohit Reddy of BRS and an ex-MLA from Rajasthan were among 10 people detained after an alleged drug bust at a farmhouse at Moinabad near Hyderabad Saturday night. Police were conducting an anti-narcotic test on them, and based on results, they might be produced before a magistrate. TNN

25 students hurt as train hits bus in TN

Twenty-five students were injured after a goods train rammed into a private college bus near Velliyanai in Tamil Nadu Saturday. One student is seriously hurt. The bus was trying to cross an unmanned railway crossing. **P 5, Other Bk**

HIV+ man injects blood into woman

An HIV+ man injected his blood into a woman relative in Hyderabad after she refused to marry him. He had contracted HIV at birth, and the woman's family had called off their marriage plans after he tested positive. He has been arrested. **P 5**

Frequent e-bus snags worry BMTC, state govt

BMTC, which deployed electric buses in city in 2019 under Union govt's clean transport push, is facing reliability concerns with about 100 e-bus breakdowns reported daily (that's 6% of its 1,700 e-fleet) during Oct-Dec 2025, **reports Suchith Kidiyoor**. Of nearly 9,000 breakdowns, 65% were battery related. Transport minister Ramalinga Reddy has written to Union minister H D Kumaraswamy, citing commuter inconvenience and revenue loss. Data also flagged safety violations, as BMTC prepares to induct 4,500 more e-buses. **P 2, Other Bk**

Vairamuthu, Tamil poet & lyricist, gets Jnanpith award

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Chennai: Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu has been chosen for the country's highest literary award, Jnanpith, for the year 2025. He is only the third Tamil litterateur to be chosen for this award after Akilan (1975) and Jayakanthan (2002). However, he is the first to receive the award for Tamil poetry; the other two got it for their prose.

"To me, literature should elevate humankind. I travel among their dreams and emotions. I had two wings. With this award, I feel I have two more wings. I dedicate this award with gratitude to Tamil society and its people," Vairamuthu told **TOI**. "The Jnanpith should have first gone to the great poet Bharathidasan. Unfortunately, he passed away before the award was instituted. So, Malayalam poet G Shankara Kurup got the first award in 1965. Sixty years later, as a poet, I'm proud to bring this award to Tamil Nadu."

▶**Hope for Tamil writers, P 5**

Case filed after student made to stand in sun

A case has been registered after a Class 1 student at a private school in Yelahanka was allegedly made to stand in the playground in scorching sun for two hours as punishment for arriving 10 minutes late to school. The boy complained to his parents of a severe headache which the parents claimed was caused by the punishment. Police registered a suo motu case after a video of the incident went viral. **P 2, Other Bk**

Protests cancel Godse event

A planned event in Surat on Sunday with a member of Nathuram Godse's family as chief guest was cancelled after a backlash. Posters announcing the event mentioned Godse as "Hindu Hriday Samrat Param Deshbhakt Late Nathuramji Godse (Emperor of Hindu Hearts, Supreme Patriot Nathuram Godse)". Amid the uproar, the posters were removed and the event was announced as cancelled due to "unforeseen circumstances." TNN

India condemns Pak air strikes on Afghanistan

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: India condemned the air strikes by Pakistan in Afghanistan's territory in the last few weeks, leading to the death of several civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure.

"This is yet another act of aggression by a Pakistani establishment that remains hostile to the idea of a sovereign Afghanistan. India reiterates that Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity should be fully respected," said external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on Saturday.

Jaiswal was responding to a media query on the Pakistani aerial raid on Afghanistan.

JCO slips during anti-terror op, dies

A JCO, Subedar Sandeep Kumar Dhaka, died Saturday following a slip in J&K's Poonch during an anti-insurgency operation. "Despite determined medical efforts to revive him, the JCO lost his life," an Army spokesperson said. **P 5**

K'taka to crack down on LPG hoarding

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Tumakuru/Bagalkot: Home minister G Parameshwara Saturday said police across Karnataka have been instructed to act against anyone found hoarding or black-marketing LPG cylinders amid supply constraints linked to West Asia turmoil. Warning of strict punitive measures, Parameshwara told reporters in Tumakuru: "If anyone tries to hoard or black-market gas cylinders, legal action will be taken against them. We will not allow this."

Speaking on the issue in Bagalkot, CM Siddaramaiah said: "Who should supply gas cylinders? It is the central govt. If they supply, the state will ensure distribution. Our food and civil supplies minister (K H Muniyappa) has held two meetings (with oil companies). I have also written to the central minister concerned to ensure there is no shortage."

Meanwhile, the food and civil supplies department, in a media release, said authorities have seized 316 domestic LPG cylinders from across the state that were allegedly being used for commercial purposes. Cases have been filed against those involved.

▶**West Asia crisis disrupts export of coffee, P 2**

▶**Domestic supply, P 2**

LARGE BATCHES OF FOOD, HIGH-FLAME COOKING MAKE INDUCTION UNRELIABLE OPTION | SHIPPING TROUBLES HIT EXPORTERS IN K'TAKA

Power limits stall induction switch at B'luru eateries

Nithya.Mandyam
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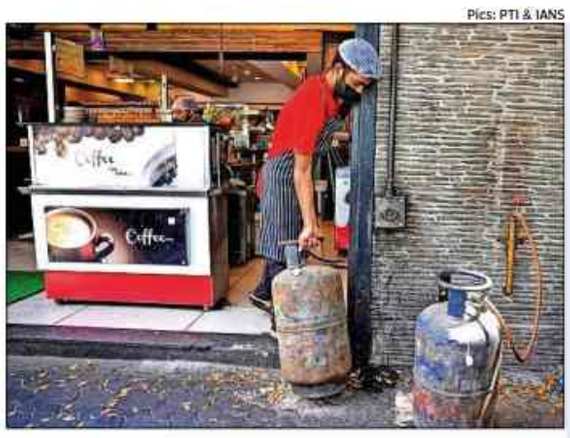
Pics: PTI & IANS



IN A PICKLE
Restaurants say relying on electric stoves is unviable due to high power demand, limited sanctioned loads and higher operating costs, forcing a few to trim menus or down shutters

Bengaluru: As LPG shortage pushes them to explore alternatives, many restaurants across the city say switching to induction cooking is easier said than done. Between limited sanctioned electricity loads and an already stressed power infrastructure, relying on multiple electric stoves may not be a practical option for large-scale cooking throughout the day, say restaurateurs.

While many households have begun panic-buying induction stoves as a temporary substitute for LPG, restaurateurs point out that commercial kitchens operate on a completely different scale. Large batches of food, high-flame cooking and peak-hour demand make induction an unreliable option, forcing several eateries to trim their menus or alter cooking methods.

Chandrashekar Hebbar, honorary president of Karnataka State Hotels Association, told **TOI** that more than 20% of restaurants across Bengaluru are already affected by the LPG shortage, though many establishments are reluctant to publicly acknowledge the disruption. "A majority of hotels are affected and many have started limiting their menu to rice-based items and food that requires less LPG," he said, adding that switching entirely to induction cooking is impractical for most establishments.

Another major constraint is power load capacity. According to Hebbar, most restaurants do not have the sanctioned power needed to run several induction stoves simultaneously. "We may need higher sanctioned load to support this kind of additional demand. Also, the more appliances we use, the greater the load on transmission lines which are already overburdened," he said.

For now, restaurateurs are using induction stoves only for limited tasks. "Activities such as heating milk or preparing coffee, tea, and snacks can be done using induction stoves. But it would be impossible to prepare items like idli, dosa, or curries entirely on induction during peak hours," said Ramesh Kamath, who runs a darshini in Jayanagar.

Apart from these operational challenges, the economics of switching to electricity is also discouraging. "The electricity bill would rise considerably compared to LPG expenses. Induction may work temporarily for a few items, but running an entire commercial kitchen on electricity is extremely expensive," said Sanjay Pate, who runs a restaurant in Indiranagar.

Energy department officials, however, maintain that a temporary shift to electric stoves will not significantly strain the state's power grid. "In 2025, the state witnessed a peak demand of about 18,000 MW. Currently, the peak demand is 8,000 MW to 9,000 MW. Even if there is widespread usage of electric stoves, it will not make a big impact on consumption as it would increase the demand by a few hundred megawatts; the state is prepared to address such a surge in demand. Normally, in a month, an induction stove for a family of four would consume 2-4 units a day," a Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation engineer said.

Assn seeks rebate

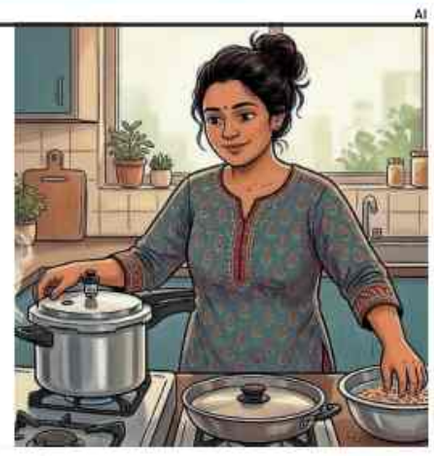
With many hotels and restaurants shifting to electric mode for cooking given the LPG crisis, Bangalore Hotels' Association has appealed to CM Siddaramaiah to provide relief in terms of electricity charges.

The association submitted a representation requesting the govt to grant a rebate of Rs 2 per unit for hotels and restaurants until the gas supply situation stabilises. It argued that such a measure would help eateries manage rising operational costs and prevent further strain on the sector.

Highlighting that thousands of small and medium-sized eateries depend on stable fuel supply to sustain daily operations, the association appealed to the govt to intervene quickly and support the sector. TNN

10 WAYS YOU CAN CUT LPG USE

AI



With LPG supply disruptions continuing in Bengaluru, many households are becoming more conscious about how efficiently they use cooking gas. While the current situation has made fuel conservation urgent, mindful kitchen practices are always useful — helping reduce wastage, lowering household costs and making cooking more energy-efficient. Health coach and author **Dr Nandita Iyer** says just three simple practices — using a pressure cooker, soaking ingredients and cooking with a closed lid — can reduce kitchen fuel use by nearly 30%. Here are her top 10 tips to cut your gas bill.

1 USE PRESSURE COOKER

Pressure cooking is one of the most efficient ways to cook. It can reduce cooking time by 30–70%, especially for foods like: Dal, beans and legumes, potatoes, meat

2 SOAK PULSES, BEANS AND RICE

Soaked ingredients can cook 30–50% faster, saving both time and fuel. Recommended soaking times: Rajma / chana: 8–10 hours | Dal: 30–60 minutes | Rice: 20–30 minutes

3 USE RIGHT BURNER SIZE

Most Indian gas stoves have different burner sizes. Use them strategically: Small burner: Tea, tadka, reheating | Large burner: Boiling water, pressure cooking | Using large burner for small vessels wastes gas. Also ensure that the flame does not extend beyond the circumference of the pan

4 ALWAYS COOK WITH A LID

This simple habit can reduce fuel consumption by 20–25%. It... Retains heat inside | Reduces evaporation | Speeds up cooking

5 CUT VEGETABLES INTO SMALLER PIECES

They cook faster because: They have more surface area | Heat penetrates them more quickly For example, diced potatoes cook faster than large chunks

6 COOK MULTIPLE ITEMS TOGETHER

Use stacking in a pressure cooker to cook several dishes at once. Example: Dal at the bottom | Rice in vessel above | Vegetables in small bowl on top | Even in smaller cookers, you can cook vegetable directly in the cooker and place another in a small cup above it

7 KEEP BURNERS CLEAN

Blocked burner holes lead to inefficient combustion. Clean burners every few weeks to ensure: Steady blue flame | Faster heating | Lower LPG use | Yellow flame indicates incomplete combustion, which wastes fuel

8 USE RESIDUAL HEAT

Many foods continue cooking even after the flame is turned off. So, switching off gas 2–3 minutes earlier can help save fuel. Examples: Rice or khichdi | Pasta | Boiled vegetables | Dal after pressure cooking

9 USE HEAVY, FLAT-BOTTOMED COOKWARE

Heavy-bottom cookware distributes heat more evenly and cooks food faster. Recommended materials: Stainless steel with thick base | Triply steel | Cast iron (for slow cooking) | Thin vessels lose heat easily and can increase fuel usage

10 COOK SMARTER

Adopt a few efficient cooking habits: Use electric kettle to boil water for tea, pasta, blanching vegetables or adding to pressure cooker. It is often more energy-efficient than LPG for heating water | Batch-cook rice, dal, beans or potatoes for 2–3 meals at once and refrigerate the extra portions | This way, the same fuel consumption yields multiple meals, making cooking more efficient

Boy, 15, shooting reels falls to death from bldg

Times News Network

Bengaluru: An evening outing to shoot social media reels ended in tragedy as a 15-year-old student fell to death from a dilapidated building in west Bengaluru Friday evening.

Nishanth H, a class 10 student, had appeared for his CBSE examinations that ended a week ago. According to police, Nishanth, who left his Ullal home around 4.30pm, met two friends, and the trio decided to shoot reels. One of them suggested visiting an abandoned resort building in D Group Layout for the shoot.

Police said the building has been vacant for nearly 20 years because of a legal dispute. Investigators suspect the boys entered the premises after the security guard had left for the day by squeezing through a narrow passage beside the compound wall.

Once inside, Nishanth climbed onto the wall of a tennis court structure and reached the roof, which had polycarbonate sheets installed for lighting. As he stepped onto one of the sheets, his friends standing below warned him not to walk on it and asked him to return. However, Nishanth had already walked a few steps across the sheet and was attempting to turn back when the fragile material suddenly gave way. He fell from a height of 35-40ft, sustaining severe head injuries.

His friends rushed him to a nearby hospital, but doctors declared him dead.

Nishanth was the elder son of civil contractor Harsha. His grieving parents have donated his eyes. Police have registered a case of unnatural death.

Union demands investigation into ₹1 milk sale

Times News Network

Bengaluru: The Bangalore Urban, Rural and Ramanagara District Cooperative Milk Producers' Societies' Union Ltd (Bamul) has written to the Competition Commission of India (CCI) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking an investigation into steep discounts in the sale of milk, dairy products, and other farmer-produced commodities by quick-commerce platforms. They said some platforms have started selling milk at Re 1 per litre.

In his letter to the competition regulator, Bamul president DK Suresh said such pricing strategies could disrupt the traditional supply chain and affect rural livelihoods. He noted that aggressive discount-driven campaigns could undermine the financial stability of milk cooperatives and impact the incomes of farmers who depend on the cooperative model for assured procurement and stable prices. The practice could also affect thousands of small retailers who rely on dairy products as a major component of their daily sales, the letter stated.

Suresh urged CCI to examine whether such campaigns amount to predatory pricing or an abuse of dominant position by digital commerce platforms. According to Bamul, protecting the stability of India's dairy ecosystem is critical as it supports millions of rural households and has been central to the country's emergence as one of the world's largest milk producers.

West Asia crisis disrupts export of coffee

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Karnataka's coastal coffee export hub is facing disruption due to the West Asia crisis, with shipments to the Gulf countries delayed and freight costs rising sharply.

Exporters in Mangaluru said cargo bound for the Gulf countries, usually routed through Jebel Ali Port in the UAE, has been put on hold following the crisis. The freight cost for a 20-tonne container to Jebel Ali Port has risen from about $578 to $3,800, while shipments via Shuwaikh Port, Kuwait, cost $4,500, up from $850.

Ganesh Chakrapani, a major coffee exporter from Mangaluru, said the closure of the UAE port has forced exporters to look at alternatives such as Sohar Port in Oman. Under the revised arrangement, coffee is shipped to Sohar and then transported by road to the Gulf countries, and the freight charges have shot up sixfold, he said. New Mangalore Port Authority accounts for about 90% of India's coffee exports, while Kochi in Kerala handles around 8% and Mumbai about 2%.

Chakrapani said overall, West Asia and neighbouring countries account for 30-35% of India's total coffee exports. The region mainly exports Arabica coffee in large volumes to the Gulf markets, along with other varieties, including Robusta, instant coffee, and Monsooned Malabar coffee produced in coastal Karnataka.

Between Jan 1 and March 10, the Gulf countries together imported 14,965 tonnes of coffee from India. The variety-wise breakdown stood at 6,633 tonnes of Arabica, 5,373 tonnes of Robusta, 2,935 tonnes of instant coffee and 28 tonnes of roasted coffee. Exporters said the crisis has also pushed up coffee prices.

Chilli also not too hot

The West Asia crisis is intensifying by the day, nearly halting large container ships from passing through the Strait of Hormuz. This has impacted the global market for Byadagi chilli from Haveri district.

Some containers are stranded at Mumbai and Chennai ports, leaving chilli worth hundreds of crores of rupees stuck. Money owed to Byadagi traders from Iran has not been paid, putting them in a difficult situation, according to trader Shivanand Mallanagoudra.

The export of Byadagi chilli to Gulf countries has completely stopped, while the cost of exporting chilli to other countries has increased, traders added. The chilli, used in preparation of spices and cosmetics, is exported to Malaysia, Indonesia, Bali, Thailand and Singapore, but the cost of renting containers for export to Iran, Israel and the US has risen.

Traders say if this continues, the price of chilli brought in by farmers will decrease.

— Basavaraj Maralihalli

Home min: No issues with supply of domestic cylinders in state

▶ Continued from page 1

Following minister Muniyappa's instructions to take appropriate legal action if domestic cylinders are used for commercial purposes, cases have been registered under the Essential Commodities Act and seizures made across the state, including 45 in Peenya and 209 in Chikkajala in Bengaluru, three in Shivamogga district, 46 in Davanagere, and 13 in Yadgir district, the department said.

In addition, a case was registered against a gas distribution outlet at KGF, Kolar district, for illegally refilling gas cylinders, the release added.

While acknowledging a shortage of commercial cylinders, the home minister said there were no issues with the supply of domestic LPG cylinders. "Hotels may face problems for a couple of days, though efforts are under way to resolve the issue," he added.

Woman hotelier writes to PM

A Bengaluru-based hotel owner has written to PM Modi, seeking urgent intervention to address the shortage of commercial LPG cylinders, which she said is severely affecting women entrepreneurs in the hospitality sector.

Roopa Shastri, owner of Rasapaka Hotel in Bengaluru's Gandhinagar, said supply of commercial LPG cylinders had fallen by more than 50%, threatening the survival of hotels and eateries like hers that cater to hundreds of people daily.

She highlighted that thousands of women depend on the hotel industry for employment.

Youth missing for 2 months, family seeks police help

Bengaluru: A 22-year-old BTech graduate, Vetrimaran K, has been reported missing from his grandparents' house in Vasanthnagar since Jan 17. His family approached police nearly two months later, on March 10.

The complaint was filed by his mother, an HR professional with a private firm. According to the complaint, Vetrimaran had left home several times before but usually returned within a month. This time, however, he has not come back.

Family members told police that he was not keen on taking up a job and was more interested in spirituality, often expressing a desire to stay in ashrams.

The family resides in Chikkabidarakallu on Tumakuru Road, but since 2024, Vetrimaran had been spending most of his time at his grandparents' house in Vasanthnagar. He completed his engineering degree last year. His mother said the family had repeatedly advised him to apply for jobs, but he showed little interest, frequently talking about living in ashrams and mutts where he could get free food and lead a simple life. In the past, he had travelled to cities including Mumbai, Delhi, Goa and Kurukshetra before eventually returning home. TNN

Mom & kid hurt in cylinder blast; plaint against gas firm

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: A late-night cylinder blast inside a house left a 28-year-old woman and her nine-year-old daughter injured and destroyed several household items, including cash, a washing machine, a TV, clothes and other belongings of the family.

According to a complaint filed by Amitha Pal, a resident of Muneshwara Layout in Begur in east Bengaluru, the family lives on the fourth floor of a residential building. Around 11.40pm on March 11, while the family was asleep, they heard a loud explosion. When they woke up, they noticed the house had caught fire.

Amitha's husband quickly rushed both of them out of the house. However, Amitha sustained burns, while her daughter suffered injuries near her eye. Neighbours rushed to the spot and helped douse the flames. The injured were later shifted to a nearby private hospital.

Amitha told police that the family had purchased a 2023-model gas stove along with an AEGIS Pure Gas regulator and cylinder for Rs 2,500. The cylinder was refilled at a nearby shop, Mahalakshmi Provision Store.

After the cylinder ran empty on March 5, her husband reportedly paid Rs 2,200 at the shop for a refill. On the night of March 11, the family was sleeping in the bedroom when the blast occurred, she told Begur police.

A case under Sections 125(a) (act endangering life or personal safety of others) and 287 (negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter) of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita has been registered, Begur police said.

Customer sends lewd messages to bank staffer, faces case

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

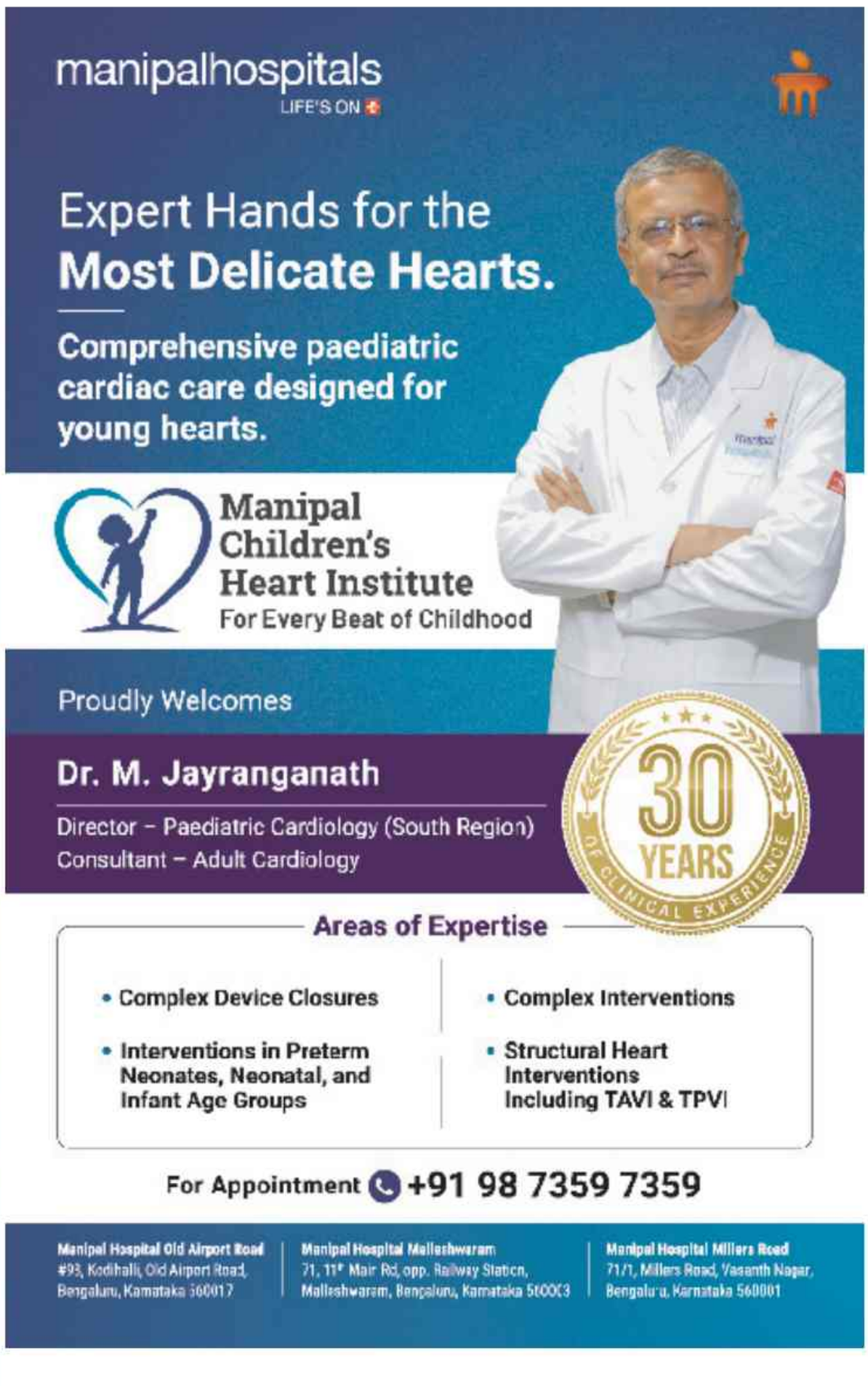
Bengaluru: A 40-year-old SBI staffer in east Bengaluru was allegedly sexually harassed by a customer. The accused, KR Ravi Shetty, a businessman, reportedly used his visit to the bank to exploit the employee.

According to the complaint filed by Preethi (name changed), Shetty visited the branch on March 10 to enquire about internet banking services. During the conversation, he asked her to give a missed call on his mobile number for banking purposes, which she did, unaware of his intentions.

Later that day, at 8pm, Shetty allegedly began sending lewd and obscene messages. Preethi issued a warning and reported the incident to the branch's chief manager on March 11. When contacted, Shetty promised to visit the bank and apologise.

However, at 5.20pm, he sent another inappropriate message to the chief manager regarding the complainant, further aggravating the situation.

Following the incident, the complainant approached police. A case has been registered under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita Section 75 (sexual harassment) at Banaswadi police station, and a notice has been issued to Shetty.



Govt OKs ₹4,824cr projects, Bagmane's ₹494cr tops list

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: Karnataka govt has cleared industrial projects worth Rs 4,824.3 crore that are expected to generate 14,525 jobs across the state, with Bagmane Constructions' Rs 494-crore IT infrastructure project emerging as the single largest investment.

The approvals were granted at the 158th meeting of the state-level single-window approval committee, chaired by industries minister MB Patil.

The committee approved 37 new industries and two additional investment projects across 13 districts, including Vijayapura, Bagalkote, Chitradurga, Kolar and Ramanagara. "The approved projects in sectors such as IT infrastructure, sugar manufacturing, technical textiles, compressed biogas, aerospace, jewellery production, electronics, software and five-star hotel construction will generate 14,525 new employment opportunities in the state," Patil said Saturday, a day after the meeting.

According to the minister's office, the bulk of the investment comes from 22 large and medium industrial projects with investments of more than Rs 50 crore each. These projects together account for Rs 3,908 crore and are expected to generate 12,475 jobs.

Another 15 projects with investments between Rs 15 crore and Rs 50 crore have been cleared with a combined investment of Rs 350 crore, creating 1,750 jobs. Two additional investment proposals worth Rs 565 crore were also approved and are expected to generate about 300 jobs.

The projects span multiple sectors, including IT infrastructure, manufacturing, hospitality, electronics and renewable energy, and will be set up in different parts of the state.

MAJOR PROJECTS CLEARED BY GOVT

- **Bagmane Constructions** | IT infra | ₹494.6cr
- **Karnataka Bangaru Sugars** | Sugar factory | ₹443cr
- **Kleine Pax** | Technical textile unit | ₹376cr
- **Trishul Buildtech and Infra** | Five-star hotel project | ₹300cr
- **Troult Grass** | Compressed biogas unit | ₹257cr
- **Tsuyo Manufacturing** | E-vehicle motor & controller manufacturing | ₹250cr

Source: Karnataka govt

KIADB EYES 2,100 ACRES NEAR KWIN CITY AS DEMAND GROWS

Bengaluru: Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board (KIADB) has identified around 2,100 acres of land near the proposed KWIN City between Dabaspet and Doddaballapura in Bengaluru Rural district to expand the industrial area.

According to officials, the proposal was placed before the board for approval at its recent meeting. As per the proposal, land has been identified in four villages — Chikkabelavangala, Rampura, Sonnenahalli and Naranahalli — located about 4km from KWIN City project.

According to documents accessed by **TOI**, a team of officials led by a KIADB executive engineer conducted a spot inspection. The team submitted a report recommending acquisition of the land as the identified area is located along Satellite Town Ring Road (STRR), close to the proposed KWIN City project, and much of the land is currently lying vacant.

Officials said the report and proposal were placed before the board for consideration. KIADB sources said the board is likely to issue a preliminary notification for land acquisition soon after it gives its approval.

Officials added there has been huge demand for land for industrial establishments near Bengaluru, particularly along the STRR stretch between Dabaspet and Hoskote, due to improved road infrastructure and proximity to Kempegowda International Airport. This has prompted KIADB to identify more land to create industrial land banks around Bengaluru.

According to KIADB data, the board has already acquired 18,613 acres of land in Bengaluru Rural district, while the acquisition process is under way for another 6,521 acres. With the addition of the proposed 2,100 acres, a total of 27,234 acres will be developed as industrial areas in Bengaluru Rural district. TNN

₹18L Hublot watch on MLA's wrist sets off chatter

Congress MLA K Raghavendra Hitnal said he borrowed the costly timepiece from his friend

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Koppal: A glittering luxury watch on the wrist of Congress MLA K Raghavendra Hitnal stole the spotlight at a village programme and quickly turned into the hottest talking point in the area.

REVISIT OF 2016 ROW?

Hitnal was seen sporting a Hublot wristwatch, estimated to cost at least Rs 18 lakh, during an event at Hirebaganal village in Koppal taluk Friday. The timepiece caught the eyes of locals almost instantly, with many whispering about the watch long after the speeches ended.

Soon, photos of the MLA wearing the luxury watch began circulating. Hitnal, however, was quick to clear the air, saying the watch was not his.

According to him, he had earlier given his own watch to a friend, who lent him the Hublot for a day. "I wore it for just one day. What is wrong with that?" Hitnal said.

The sight of the watch sparked a political flashback. In March 2016, CM Siddaramaiah found himself at the centre of a similar storm over a Hublot Big Bang 301-M watch. Amid mounting criticism, he eventually handed it over to then assembly speaker Kagodu Thimmappa to be declared a state asset.

Man kills live-in partner, fabricates suicide scene

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Ranjitha HG and Ayyappa KB

Bengaluru: A 23-year-old woman was murdered allegedly by her live-in partner at Ramdas Layout, Kodathi, southeast Bengaluru, early Thursday. The accused allegedly tried to make the crime appear like a suicide. However, a police investigation led to his arrest.

The deceased has been identified as Ranjitha HG and the accused as Ayyappa KB. The couple had been living together in a rented house. Ayyappa worked in a dry fruit shop, while Ranjitha was employed as a domestic help. Both are natives of Kodagu district.

According to a complaint filed by Ranjitha's mother Rani, her daughter had fallen in love with Ayyappa.

On Dec 31, 2025, she took him home and introduced him to the family as her boyfriend, telling them that she intended to marry him. Ayyappa reportedly told the family that he was already married but living separately from his wife due to marital issues. He allegedly promised to marry Ranjitha after obtaining a divorce.

Two weeks before her death, Ranjitha called her mother and complained that Ayyappa would assault her frequently over trivial issues.

In the early hours of March 12, Ayyappa called Ranjitha's sister and claimed she had attempted suicide. He said he had taken her to a private hospital on Sarjapur Road, where doctors declared her dead.

Police found that Ayyappa had strangled Ranjitha with a wire before attempting to fabricate a suicide scene by tying a rope to the ceiling fan. During interrogation, the accused reportedly confessed to the crime.

KSRTC to run 2k buses to ease rush

UGADI & EID UL-FITR

Bengaluru: To manage the rush during festivals next week, Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) will operate 2,000 additional buses across the state. Ugadi is on March 19 and Eid ul-Fitr is expected to be on March 20 or 21.

The extra services will run on March 18, 19, 20, in addition to the existing schedules, for the benefit of passengers travelling from Bengaluru to various parts of Karnataka and neighbouring states. Most of the special services will operate from Kempegowda bus station, Majestic, to places like Dharmasthala, Kukke Subramanya, Shivamogga, Hassan, Mangaluru, Kundapur, Sringeri, Horanadu, Belagavi, Tirupati and Hyderabad.

Additional buses will also operate towards Mysuru. TNN

TIMES TRIBUTE

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REMEMBRANCE

MARY KURIEN
Parolickal House
14.04.1934 - 15.03.2022
"Your life was a gift to us, your memory will live in our hearts forever.
Jijee and Dr. Koshy, Bijou and Sheila, Jessy and Joshua; and their children

Fond Remembrance of
Dr. K ANJI REDDY

"Time passes, but the imprint of a noble soul never fades."

On this day of remembrance, we reflect not only on the empire you envisioned, but the kindness you lived every day. A husband who led with quiet strength, a father whose love shaped our lives. Your absence is felt beyond words.

Some bonds go beyond time. Ours always will -
K. Padma Reddy (Wife) | Abhijna K. Reddy (Daughter)

In Fond Remembrance on Her
9th Anniversary
(15-03-2017)

Smt. Rukmini Nagaraj Vemulkar
Her Blessings are our Inheritance

She lived a life of simplicity and selfless devotion to her family, guided always by truth and piety. Through quiet acts of charity and kindness, she touched the lives of the less fortunate with compassion.

Fondly remembered and deeply missed by children, daughters-in-law, grand children & great grandchildren.

Padmini GROUP OF COMPANIES
Head Office: 157, K. Kamaraj Road, Bengaluru - 560 042

Remembrance

Sri Vasanthan K
24th May 1950 - 15th March 2025
You will forever remain cherished in our hearts
Your loving wife Shobha, Family & Friends

DEATH ANNOUNCEMENTS

OBITUARY

Sri K.LAKSHMANAN
(Rtd. Indian iol Corporation)
H/o Late L.Balam (Lakshmi)
DOB: 12-12-1941 - DOD: 13-03-2026
The unconditional love for all.May the soul rest in peace.
We miss you APPA.
Deeply mourned by:
Daughters, Sons-in-law, & Grandchildren
(Cell No: 9677240658 9958427830, 9845349363)

SAD DEMISE

Smt. LAKSHMAMMA
(W/o. Late KV Narayanappa Adv.)
Passed away peacefully on 14.03.2026.
Visitation - She will be at our residence till 10 a.m., 15.03.2026. Address: #65, 40 Feet Road, NN Farm Layout, Sanjaynagar, Bengaluru - 94.
Last Rites will be performed at 2 p.m. on 15.03.2026 in our Kambadahalli Village, Melur, Sidlaghatta Taluk, Chikkaballapur District.
In Grief:
KN Venkatesh Murthy, KN Prasanna Kumar, KN Hemalatha and Family Members.

SAD DEMISE

N R Ekambaram
DOB: 20.5.1933 - DOD: 8.3.2026
Gone from our sight. but never from our Hearts. We miss you more than words can express.
Wife, Son's and Daughters Family Members
M: 9739920001/ 9243450116

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REMEMBRANCE
SHARING MEMORIES

REMEMBRANCE
SMT. LAKSHMAMMA
W/o H. NARAYANA REDDY
Demise on 29.02.1996
Ekadasi
Loving family members.

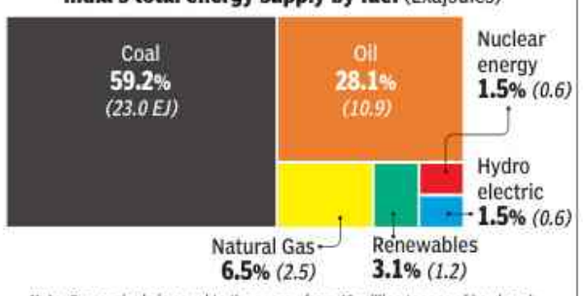
27th Death Anniversary
ANANDA M SHETTY
Janata Medical Stores, Shivajinagar
To have, to love, & then to part is the greatest sorrow of one's heart. The years may wipe out many things but some they wipe out never like memories of happy times. Wife and children.

STATISTICS A slice of life in numbers

The reality of India's energy basket

Coal remains the backbone of India's energy mix at nearly 60%, with oil contributing 28%, even as renewables expand owing to clean energy targets

India's total energy supply by fuel (Exajoules)



Note: One exajoule is equal to the energy from 40 million tonnes of hard coal;
Source: 2025 Energy Institute Statistical Review of World Energy

Will ban conversions if BJP forms govt In Punjab: Shah

'State Has Become ATM For Kejriwal'

IP.Singh@timesofindia.com

The home minister indicated that the party would go alone in 2027 polls

Killi Chahal (Moga): Union home minister Amit Shah sounded the bugle for the 2027 Punjab assembly election with a 'badlav rally' in Moga, urging people to give BJP "ik mauka" (one chance), and promising that the party's first legislation would be an anti-conversion bill. Shah also promised to rid the state of debts, drugs and corruption, while indicating that BJP was no longer looking at piggybacking on Akali Dal in the state.

"Under AAP, religious conversions have reached alarming levels. A BJP govt in Punjab will bring its first bill to ban religious conversions," Shah told a large gathering in Killi Chahal village on Saturday.

Shah indicated that BJP would go it alone in 2027, and expressed confidence that the party would form govt in Punjab. "It is the beginning of BJP's campaign. Whenever we came to Punjab, we came as the younger brother, but today I say, BJP is fighting 2027 election to make its govt," he said.

Training guns on Aam Aadmi Party and Congress, Shah said the two parties had pushed Punjab into a financial mess, drugs and corruption. "Only PM Modi and BJP can build a drug-free and development-oriented Punjab. BJP will make Punjab drug-free within two years of forming govt in the state," he said.

Shah said Punjab was the granary of the country and its jawans protected the nation, but today the state had "only became an ATM for (AAP national convener Arvind) Kejriwal".

"This govt represents breaking of promises. This is a govt that's neck-deep in corruption. The CM should be ashamed that four 'subedars' from Delhi are sitting here and looting the state, and he can't utter a word," he further said.

There was complete lawlessness in Punjab under AAP, Shah said, citing the murders of three sarpanches earlier this year. CM Bhagwant Mann's "only job is to take Arvind Kejriwal along on Punjab govt plane wherever he would go in the country. The CM is reduced to just a pilot", he said.

Shah also accused AAP and Congress, particularly Rahul Gandhi, of "telling lies" and misleading farmers on the India-US trade deal.

He said industry was leaving Punjab and farmers were left in the lurch. "You gave opportunities to Congress, Akalis and AAP in the past. Now, give an opportunity to BJP. We shall bring a change in Punjab," the home minister added.

"Congress sent tanks to Akal Takht, damaging Sikh-Hindu unity. Punjab's development is possible only through unity of both communities. Had Congress truly respected the gurus, Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur would not have been in Pakistan. Modi govt opened the Kartarpur Corridor, enabling devotees to visit the shrine," Shah said.

After opening his speech with "Jo Bole So Nihal", he paid respect to the Sikh Gurus and said: "This turban (pointing to his saffron coloured turban) symbolises the debt the entire country owes the Gurus." There would have been no Hindus in India if Guru Teg Bahadur had not been there. "His sacrifice sustained the country," Shah said. He also paid respects to Maharishi Valmiki, Guru Ravidas, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Start cholesterol checks at 19, say new heart guidelines

Anuja.Jaiswal
@timesofindia.com

Doctors say the advice is important because high cholesterol quietly damages blood vessels

New Delhi: People should begin checking their cholesterol levels as early as age 19 and monitor them regularly, according to new global heart health guidelines that warn that decades of untreated high cholesterol can silently raise the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

The recommendations come from the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association, whose guidance is widely followed by doctors worldwide. The updated 2026 dyslipidemia management guidelines recommend that adults start cholesterol screening at 19 and repeat the test at least once every five years to detect problems early.

Doctors say the advice is important because high cholesterol often has no symptoms but quietly damages blood vessels and increases the risk of cardiovascular disease over time. Prolonged exposure to high levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad cholesterol", leads to plaque build-up in arteries and raises lifetime risk of heart disease.

From an Indian perspective, experts say the guidelines are particularly relevant as South Asians face higher cardiovascular risk. Dr Ambuj Roy, professor in the cardiology department at AIIMS, said the document identifies South Asian ancestry as a "risk enhancer", meaning Indians may require earlier and more aggressive cholesterol management.

"South Asians have both a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease and worse outcomes once heart disease occurs," Roy said. "Along with blood pressure and blood sugar, every adult should have their lipid profile checked, so lifestyle changes and treatment can begin early to prevent premature heart disease, which we are increasingly seeing in young Indians."

He added that statins remain the cornerstone of cholesterol-lowering therapy. "Despite myths circulating on social media, statins are safe and highly beneficial, particularly for people with heart disease or those facing risk factors such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity or family history," Roy said.

Dr Anoop Misra of Fortis Hospital said the updated recommendations recognise the high cardiovascular risk among South Asians.

Hope more Tamil writers win this award: Vairamuthu

▶Continued from page 1

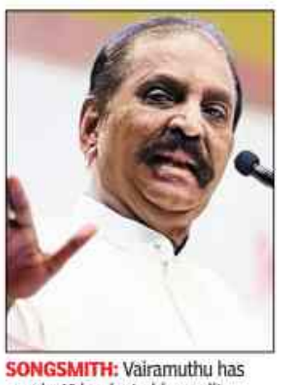
I can understand this delay in recognizing Tamil writers, because this award is being given on a rotational basis. However, the Hindi literary world has got this award 12 times, Kannada eight times, and Malayalam six times. Tamil being a classical language should have been given more attention. That is my only regret. Hope, in future more Tamil writers will receive this award," Vairamuthu said.

Born in Theni district on July 13, 1953, Vairamuthu completed earned his master's in Tamil from Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai with gold medal.

At the age of 18, he published his first poetry collection 'Vaigarai Meengal' while he was still a student.

After completing his education, Vairamuthu started working in the Official Language Commission of Tamil Nadu govt. In 1980, he entered the Tamil film industry as a lyricist in the film 'Nizhalgal', directed by Bharathiraja, his long-time friend. The song 'Idhu oru ponmaalai pozhuthu', with music composed by Ilayaraaja, was praised for its new imagery. This knack of introducing new imagery, words, metaphors, similes, and alliterations earned Vairamuthu the title 'Kaviperarasu' (literally, Emperor of Poets).

"When I entered the film industry, I innovated a new form of writing songs by blending new verse with values taken from traditional poems. That became my style," said Vairamuthu.


SONGSMITH: Vairamuthu has nearly 40 books to his credit, including his autobiography titled 'Idhu varai naan' (1983)

Vairamuthu has penned more than 8,000 songs and has won seven national awards for his lyrics. He has a rare distinction of writings songs for three generations, starting from Sivaji Ganesan to Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth to Dhanush and Vijay Sethupathi.

"Every day, I learn new things and update myself. That's why I am able to work with different generations," the seven time national award winner said.

Vairamuthu has nearly 40 books to his credit, including his autobiography titled 'Idhu varai naan' (1983).

His novel 'Kallikkaattu Ithihasam' (2001) chronicles the struggles of people who migrated due to the construction of the Vaigai dam, which won him Sahitya Akademi award in 2003. The novel has been translated into all the 23 other official Indian languages.

Hindalco halts aluminium product sales amid Iran war

Hindalco Industries Ltd has notified customers that it's suspending sales of extruded aluminium products, in a sign of the broadening impact that the Iran war is having on the metal's global supply chain.

The conflict has already prompted some aluminium smelters in West Asia to suspend sales due to the effective halt on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, but manufacturers and industrial businesses in India are also facing disruptions to gas supplies transiting through crucial waterway.

As the supply-chain turmoil grows, Hindalco has invoked force majeure clauses in supply contracts with buyers of its extruded aluminium products, according to people familiar with the matter, who asked not to be identified because the communications were private. The products are used in an array of industries including car-making and construction.

SUPPLY SQUEEZE

A spokesperson for Hindalco didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Hindalco makes extruded products from commodity-grade metal sourced from smelters in India, and those smelters are operating as normal, the people said. While smelting aluminium ingots requires huge amounts of electricity, a reliable supply of gas is also crucial in order to transform them into end-use products.

Hindalco's suspension of extruded product sales comes as analysts and traders warn that the global aluminium market could face severe shortages unless shipping through the strait resumes soon. Some West Asian producers have already declared force majeure due to disruptions to outbound shipments, and there are expectations that they will soon need to start cutting output unless they can bring in additional raw materials through the strait.

aluminium prices have surged since the conflict began, with futures hitting the highest in nearly four years on Thursday on the London Metal Exchange. In physical markets from Asia to the US, manufacturers are paying rising premiums over the LME benchmark to obtain spot supplies at short notice, while traders have been racing to withdraw stockpiles from the LME. BLOOMBERG

Arrest Badshah: Hry women's panel to police

Chandigarh: Haryana State Commission for Women on Saturday directed police to arrest rapper **Badshah** alias Aditya Prateek Singh Sisodia in cases registered against him at three places over his controversial song 'Tateeree'.

One of the three is a criminal case. HSCW chairperson Renu Bhatia issued directions to Panchkula DC and Panipat SP, where the cases are registered, for "execution of orders as soon as possible". She also directed police and authorities to seize Badshah's passport and ban his programmes across the state.

"Despite our reminder, he did not turn up for the hearing and instead released another video message. We gave him an opportunity till 3pm, as his lawyers pleaded that he could not come for the hearing due to professional commitments. This was not acceptable, hence, we issued the directions," said Bhatia. —**Manvir Saini**

Don't interfere with prayers on pvt property, Budaun admin told

Rajesh Kumar Pandey | TNN

Prayagraj: The Allahabad HC has directed authorities in Budaun not to interfere with prayers being offered in a mosque located on a private property.

In its Feb 25 directive, published recently, a division bench comprising Justices Shekhar B Saraf and Vivek Saran agreed with a view taken previously by a coordinate bench that there was no prohibition in law against conducting a religious prayer meeting on private premises.

"Upon perusal of the said judgment, we are in consensus with the view taken by the coordinate bench and, accordingly, direct the respondent-authorities not to interfere in any manner with regard to the prayers being offered within the premises of the petitioners," it said.

The directive came on a petition filed by one Ali Sher of Budaun, who had sought directions to restrain the authorities from causing any interference or obstruction in the peaceful offering of namaz by the petitioner, his family members and other members of the Muslim community in a mosque existing over a portion of his property.

His counsel had cited the judgment delivered by a division bench on Jan 27 in the case of Maranatha Full Gospel Ministries versus State of Uttar Pradesh and others.

HIV+ man injects blood into kin who rejected marriage offer, held

Mahesh Buddi@timesofindia.com

Hyderabad: A 24-year-old transport supervisor working with an IT company here has been arrested for allegedly injecting his own HIV-infected blood into a 24-year-old relative after she refused to marry him because of his medical condition. The man has been booked for attempted murder.

The incident occurred around 5 pm on March 11 at the woman's flat in Pocharam IT corridor area when she was alone at home. Police said the man, who is related to her, entered the flat and, as she approached him, suddenly pulled out a syringe from his pocket and jabbed it into her forearm without any provocation. "After emptying the contents of the syringe into her, the accused informed that she was injected with his HIV-infected blood and left the place," inspector B Raju said.

Police said the woman did not immediately inform her family about the incident. She fell ill the next day and developed a high fever, prompting family members to take her to a doctor on the morning of March 13. During the examination, the doctor noticed a dark clot mark on her forearm and questioned her about it. In the presence of her family, the woman revealed that her relative had forcibly injected her with HIV+ blood.

The family then approached the police on Friday and lodged a complaint. "We have sent the woman to Gandhi hospital for a medical examination. Doctors told us it would take up to three months for the infection to show in blood tests," the inspector said.

Medipally ACP B Mohan Kumar said the man's father, an autorickshaw driver, had died of AIDS around 19 years ago, while his mother is also HIV-positive. Police said the accused had contracted the virus at birth.

Officials said both the families had supported a marriage between the two until Sept 2025. However, before finalising the alliance, the woman's family asked the man to undergo a blood test due to his parents' medical history. "He tested positive for HIV and the woman's family cancelled the wedding plans. She also started avoiding him," the ACP said.

Police said the accused repeatedly tried to persuade the woman to marry him. "Finally, he decided that if she also gets infected, then her family would not object to their wedding and decided to inject her with his blood," he said.

Tanker carrying bitumen from UAE arrives at Karwar port

Times News Network

Karwar: A tanker carrying bitumen from the United Arab Emirates arrived at Karwar port, marking what port sources described as the first such shipment from the UAE since the recent escalation of conflict in West Asia disrupted key shipping routes. The ship arrived at the port on Friday and left Karwar on Saturday.

The vessel, named Cheng X, pulled in after a voyage that began on March 3 from Khor Fakkan port in the UAE. The ship, with a capacity of around 5,500 tonnes, was loaded with approximately 3,100 tonnes of bitumen, a vital material for road construction and other infrastructure projects in the region. The journey took the tanker through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical and currently tense maritime chokepoints. Despite temporary restrictions and heightened risks in the area amid the ongoing war involving Iran, the Cheng X made it through safely and reached Karwar. This arrival stood out because supplies from West Asia, especially bitumen and diesel, were badly hit by the disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Karwar port, which relied on these regular shipments, saw operations slow down in recent weeks.

The safe transit and delivery came as a small but welcome relief for local industries dependent on these imports.

JCO dies during anti-terror op in Poonch dist

Sanjay Khajuria@timesofindia.com

Jammu: A junior commissioned officer (JCO) died Saturday following a slip in the challenging and rugged terrain of Jammu & Kashmir's Poonch district during the anti-insurgency Operation Sheri Kalan, an army spokesperson said.

"...Subedar Sandeep Kumar Dhaka slipped and fell on the ground and subsequently became unresponsive. Despite determined medical efforts to revive him, the gallant JCO lost his life in the line of duty, said White Knight Corps' spokesperson in a post on X. "White Knight Corps pays solemn tribute to the unwavering courage, steadfast devotion and selfless service of the departed soldier."

Hosp sealed after woman, twins' bodies found in UP

Rajeev.Dikshit@timesofindia.com

Varanasi: Just 18 days after a quack's botched C-section killed a pregnant woman in Ballia, another shocker from the district emerged on Friday evening when the bodies of a 25-year-old woman, Rinku Yadav, and her newborn twin daughters were found dumped near the toilet of a private hospital.

The family blamed the deaths on negligence by the hospital and the doctors. Based on the family's complaint, police have booked six persons and arrested one of them. DMM P Singh said health department officials had sealed the hospital, located near the office of the CMO in Jagdishpur. "After lodging an FIR, senior officials were asked to conduct a detailed investigation to initiate action,"

ASP Kripa Shankar said an FIR was lodged against hospital manager Chandrashekhar Singh, his doctor son and four unidentified staff members. Singh was taken into custody. The bodies were handed over to the family after a post-mortem examination.

Rinku was taken to the private hospital by an ASHA worker when she went into labour. Singh allegedly told them that his doctor son would handle the surgery.

The victim's brother said his sister and her babies died because of the doctors' negligence. After Rinku's family alerted police and senior officials in the district administration, a team from the health department reached the hospital on Friday evening and questioned the management. Singh allegedly misled the team, claiming the family took the bodies. After the family disputed this, a probe found the bodies dumped near a toilet dustbin.

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Admission to the Integrated Bachelor's-Master's Program in Science and Master's/Integrated Master's-Ph.D. Program in Science - 2026 and Ph.D. Program in Autumn Semester of 2026

Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) is the oldest science research institute of its kind in India. Since its inception in 1876, IACS has been conducting research in fundamental sciences at the highest level. IACS is the only institution of India which has earned the Asia's first and the country's only Nobel Prize in Science on the basis of the work done from India. IACS has been conferred a Deemed University status under the de novo category for offering degrees in emerging areas of basic and applied sciences vide notification No. F.9-7.2017-U.3(A) dated 26th May 2018 by the Ministry of the Human Resource Development, Government of India. IACS is running its Integrated Bachelor's and Master's Program in Science and Master's /Integrated Master's-Ph.D. programs in various areas of science along with regular Full-time Ph.D. Program under the different Schools, namely, School of Applied and Interdisciplinary Sciences, School of Biological Sciences, School of Chemical Sciences, School of Materials Sciences, School of Mathematical and Computational Sciences, and School of Physical Sciences.

Admission to the Integrated Bachelor's-Master's Program in Science - 2026

IACS is conducting a de novo five-year Integrated Bachelor's and Master's Program in Science for highly motivated students who have passed (10+2) level Examination in science stream. The objective of this program is to provide high-quality education, research, and training in science. Through this special program, undergraduate teaching is integrated with modern research in all major Schools of the Institute. The first three semesters of the program will comprise foundational courses in Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Computer Science and Biological Sciences. From the fourth semester onwards, the students will choose one discipline (from Physics, Chemistry, Biological Science, Mathematics and Computer Science) as majors, subject to fulfilling eligibility criteria and availability of seats in the respective Schools. From the seventh semester the students will be directly exposed to research.

Applications are invited from bright and motivated Indian nationals for admission to the Integrated Bachelor's and Master's Program in Science-2026 (BS-MS 2026) likely to begin from July 21, 2026. Admission to the BS-MS 2026 program will be based on the IISER Aptitude Test (IAT) 2026 scores. Candidates who have passed 10+2 level Board Examinations in 2024, 2025 & 2026 are eligible for submitting the application for entrance test. The applicants who are due to complete their 10+2 level Board Examinations are also eligible to apply. **Please note that, the candidates seeking admission to IACS must apply to IACS application portal in addition to their application for the IISER aptitude test (IAT 2026).** At the time of application at IACS, candidates will be required to provide their IAT application number. Further updates will be uploaded at the IACS website in due course of time.

Admitted students promoted to the fourth year may be eligible to receive a monthly stipend, following the institute norms. Admission under the reserved categories, including EWS, will be as per rule.

Exit routes: As per NEP guideline, following are exit routes subject to fulfilling credit requirements as per UGC guidelines and institute's rules:

- After 1st year: Certificate in Basic Sciences with Computer
- After 2nd year: Diploma in Biological/ Chemical/ Mathematics & Computer/ Physical Science
- After 3rd year: BS Degree in Biological/ Chemical/ Mathematics & Computer/ Physical Science Major and Minor (optional) in another subject
- After 4th year: BS Degree (with research) in Biological/ Chemical/ Mathematics & Computer/ Physical Sciences and Minor (optional) in another subject

Candidates failing to maintain the requisite academic performance/ CGPA (as decided by the institute time to time), may be asked to take mandatory exit from the program using one of the above-mentioned options.

Admission to the Master's/Integrated Master's-Ph.D. Program in Science - 2026

Applications are invited from highly motivated Indian nationals for admission to the Master's/Integrated Master's-Ph.D. Program in the Schools of Chemical Sciences, Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Materials Sciences, Mathematical & Computational Sciences, and Applied & Interdisciplinary Sciences for the session likely to begin from July 21, 2026. Candidates who have completed or are due to complete their Bachelor's level University Examinations are eligible to apply but their final selection will be subject to securing 60% marks (reservation criteria will apply as per rules) in the qualifying examination. Candidates having Engineering background and opting for School of Mathematical & Computational Sciences should have adequate training in Mathematics and Computer Science. Admissions to the Master's and Integrated Master's-Ph.D. programmes in Chemistry, Biology, Physics, and Mathematics will be made through IIT JAM rank/score. Admission to the Computer Science programme will be based on GATE rank/score and/or an independent screening process following applicable rules. **Candidates will be required to apply through IACS portal and mention their JAM/GATE Enrollment ID/Score, to be considered valid as per norms (as applicable).** Further updates will be uploaded at the IACS website in due course of time.

Admitted students may be eligible to receive a **stipend of Rs. 12,000/- p.m. (fixed)** for the first two years, provided that they fulfill the prescribed CGPA and other criteria in the final examination of their first semester. On successful completion of the Master's course, the students satisfying the criteria prescribed by the Institute will be considered for admission to the Ph.D. program as Integrated Master's-Ph.D. students. A Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) will be awarded to them as per the prevailing norms, provided they fulfil the required criteria as decided by IACS. Admission under the reserved categories, including EWS will be as per rule.

Admission to Ph.D. Program in Autumn Semester of 2026

Applications are invited from highly motivated Indian Nationals having strong flair in research in the prescribed form available in the website www.iacs.res.in for admission to the Regular Ph.D. Program in the Autumn Semester of 2026 (Announcement for Admission in the Spring Session is likely to be made around October-November, 2026 in the IACS website) under different Schools of IACS. The Academic Session for the said Program will likely to commence from July 21, 2026. Detailed information regarding application procedure, minimum and desired eligibility criteria, vacancies in specific research areas and other relevant information may be found in the website www.iacs.res.in.

Applications for Integrated Bachelor's-Master's and Master's/Integrated Master's-Ph.D. Program are to be made online. The online application portal will be live tentatively on March 20, 2026. There is a non-refundable application fee of Rs. 1200 (Rs. 600 for SC/ST and PD candidates only).

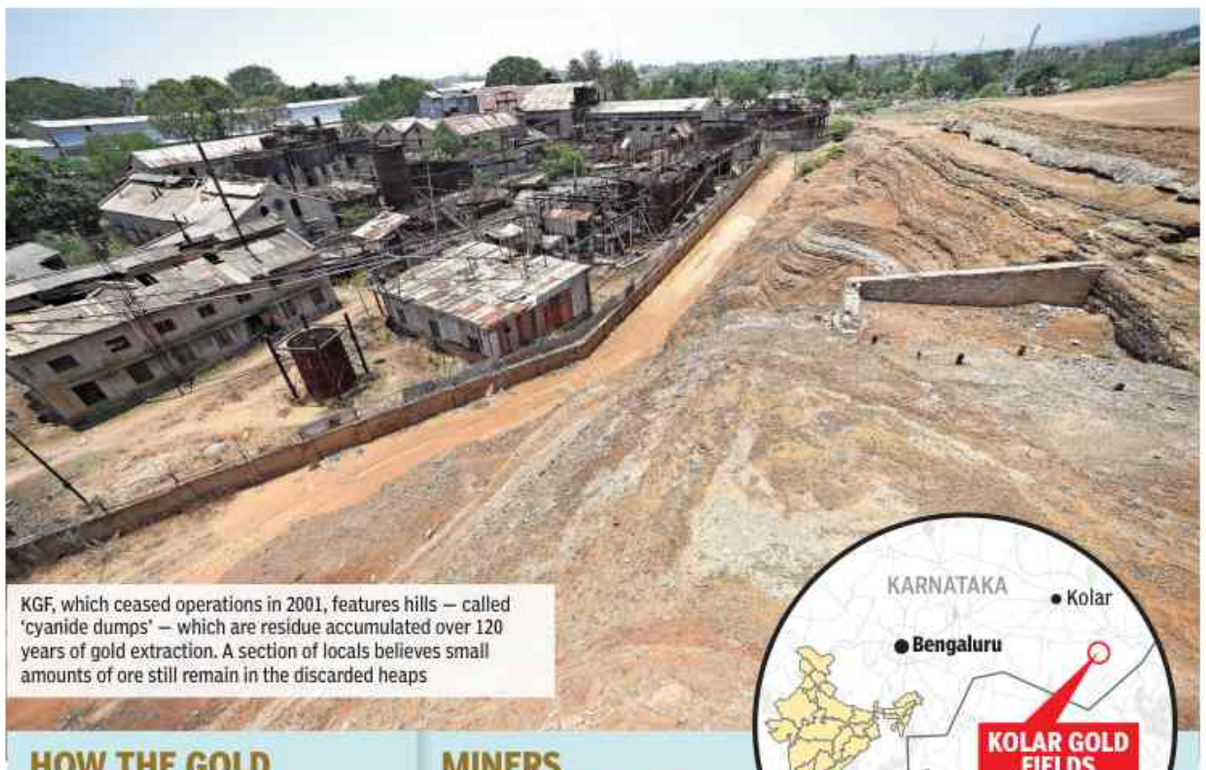
For information on the date of opening/closing for applications, Application Form, Fee Structure, Curriculum and other relevant details, please check the website **http://www.iacs.res.in** .

(REGISTRAR, IACS)

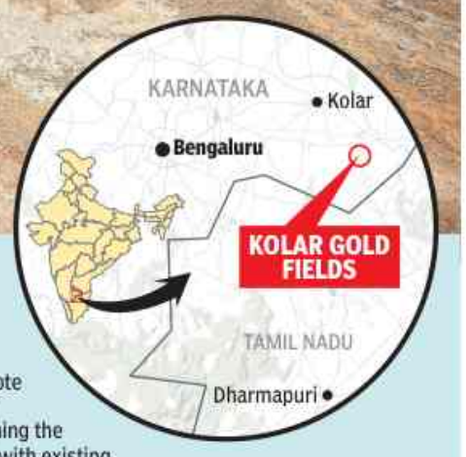
With gold prices soaring, fortune hunters still sneak into deserted shafts and cyanide dumps in Karnataka's **Kolar Gold Fields**, convinced the earth holds traces of the metal that once powered India's most famous gold town

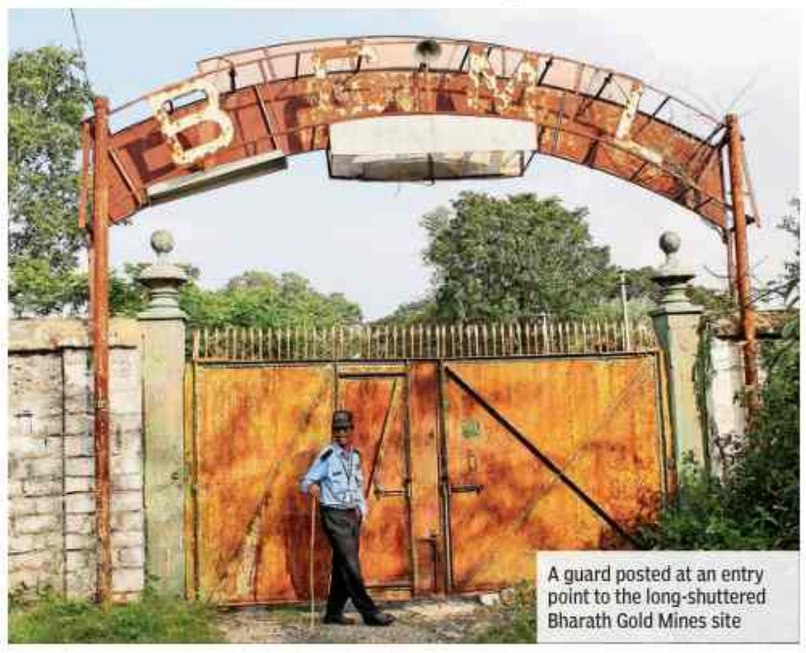
This mine closed 25 years ago, but locals are still sold on gold

Ranganath K | TNN



KGF, which ceased operations in 2001, features hills — called 'cyanide dumps' — which are residue accumulated over 120 years of gold extraction. A section of locals believes small amounts of ore still remain in the discarded heaps





A guard posted at an entry point to the long-shuttered Bharath Gold Mines site

HOW THE GOLD RUSH BEGAN

Mining here began modestly in the 1750s — using handmade tools and candlelight — during the reign of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. After Tipu's defeat, the British took over. In 1870, John Taylor and Company obtained a licence from the Mysore govt, and by 1880, licensed mining began in earnest. Skilled workers were brought from the UK. At its peak, over 12,000 people worked here, and Anglo-Indian families made KGF their home. It was truly the end of an era when the mines finally closed in 2001. Even today, however, many return during festivals to reconnect with the place.

MINERS MAKE ANOTHER REVIVAL BID

On Feb 5, former employees wrote a letter to PM Narendra Modi, renewing their demand for reopening the mines. The signatories claim that with existing shafts, tunnels and mapped reserves across the 80km Kolar belt, production could begin at two to five tonnes annually, which could gradually rise to 100 tonnes. India imports most of the gold it consumes each year, and the former miners argue that reopening KGF could reduce that dependence and generate employment. K M Divakaran, former chief engineer, BGML, and president, BGM All Employees Industrial Co-operative Society & Employees Forum, wrote on behalf of the former employees, claiming "more than 60,000 man-years of gold mine experience and expertise", and adding that reopening mining at KGF at the earliest was "in the interest of all concerned".

GOLD TRAIL IN 'MINI ENGLAND'

1750s | Early gold extraction begins under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan using handmade tools and candlelight

1870 | John Taylor and Company gets licence from Mysore govt to mine gold

1880 | Organised, licensed mining operations formally commence

1880-1956 | Mines operate profitably under British management

1972 | Post-nationalisation, operations brought under govt control; renamed Bharath Gold Mines Ltd

2001 | Mines close, citing low ore presence and financial strain

PEAK WORKFORCE
Over **12,000** direct employees; many more worked in allied activities

GEOLOGY
27-29 gold reefs identified across nearly 60 primary shafts; schist belt stretches about 72-80km

TOTAL OUTPUT
About **800 tonnes** of gold produced over roughly 120 years

On May 14, 2020, three people died while attempting to enter a deep sink at a shaft

The Last Scramble

They come quietly, often in small groups. They cut open barbed-wire fencing, slip past guards and fill sacks with mud from old shafts and dumpyards. The hope is modest: that the mud may contain particles of gold ore which, once processed, will yield a few milligrams of the metal. Even that meagre quantity is worth the risk when a gram of gold costs over Rs 16,000.

Recently, the Oorgaum police arrested 16 persons in two separate incidents. On Feb 6, a security guard, Thyagavelu, spotted eight people entering Gifford's shaft, one of the major access shafts to the underground mines, after cutting through the fencing. He alerted colleagues and the police. The group was arrested. Four days later, another guard, Shankar, noticed a gang of eight in a different shaft. They, too, were taken into custody.

The accused reportedly admitted that they extracted minute particles of gold and sold them to local jewellers. Circle inspector Markondayya said during the peak of mining operations, one tonne of ore could yield three to four grams of gold. "Even today, people believe that small amounts of ore remain in discarded heaps, which can be recovered through chemical extraction."

Though the area under BGML is guarded by private security agencies, the vast, open terrain makes complete control difficult. R N Selvan, who served as the officer on special duty for over eight years, says that in the initial years after closure, the premises were guarded by the BSF, but the force was later withdrawn. Efforts to secure CISF or another central force did not succeed, as the mining area is largely open land.

"In my years of service, I've seen many such thefts," says Selvan. Even when security is tight, groups familiar with the terrain find ways to enter. At times, he adds, security personnel themselves have colluded in the smuggling of mud.

Digging For Dust

The belief that some gold remains may not be entirely unfounded. During active mining years, cyanide leaching was used to extract gold from ore. The process left behind large tailing dumps, locally known as cyanide dumps, spread across KGF. These heaps, yellow in colour, glitter under sunlight, giving the impression that gold particles may still be embedded in the mud.

Sources who worked in the mines estimate that nearly 32 million tonnes of mud lie in these dumps. They argue that if properly recycled, the material could yield a significant quantity of gold. For informal scavengers, that possibility is enough.

K M Divakaran, retired chief engineer of BGML, explains that gold deposits in the region are linked to ancient geology. "The presence of gold ore in South India is comparable to regions like South Africa and Western Australia," he says. The Kolar schist belt, a geological zone known for gold deposits, stretches about 80km between KGF and Srinivasapur in Kolar district.

According to Divakaran, 29 ore loads were identified across around 60 shafts, including Chigaragunta in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Of these, only three were extensively tapped over 120 years, yielding about 800 to 900 tonnes of gold. Ore dust, he says, often mixes with mud. Gold particles can be separated from this mix through chemical processes.

After-Mine Economy

Retired miners in the Oorgaum area say the method used by those engaged in mud smuggling is basic. The mud is first filtered with water. It is then handed over to goldsmiths or members of the Marwari community who have expertise in extraction.

Murali, a goldsmith, describes it as "simple physics and chemistry": being heavier than water, gold particles settle at the bottom when the slurry flows through a small pit. The collected concentrate is mixed with mercury and heated. The mercury evaporates, leaving the gold behind. The process is illegal and hazardous, but persists. Some reportedly pay former BGML employees for information about spots where mud may still contain gold.

Police say scavenging from the abandoned mining areas has, over time, become an inherited activity for some families in Susaipalyam, a settlement near KGF.

While most steal mud, scrap iron and other materials, a police officer said a few families continue to search for traces of gold in wastewater flowing through old drains from the mining area. Susaipalyam, with a population of about 1,800, remains one of the more economically backward pockets around KGF, with limited educational opportunities. Manivannan (name changed), a 50-year-old who has seen such activity since childhood, says some middlemen also provide technical know-how for extracting traces of gold.

There have been fatalities. On May 14, 2020, three people died while trying to enter a deep sink at Hancock's shaft. During mining operations, slush from the smelting process was drained through pipelines into such sinks. Believing that residual gold might have settled at the bottom, a group of seven men attempted to enter the open well-like structure. Two men climbed down using a pipeline but collapsed due to asphyxiation. A third entered later, felt suffocated and came out. When there was no response from below, another man, whose father was inside, jumped into the sink without support. It was pitch dark. Police and fire personnel were alerted. Two bodies were retrieved quickly, while the third was recovered only after several days of effort. The digging continues despite the risks.

Meet the man from Mewat who carries two faiths in one song

Born into a community of Muslim folk singers who perform Hindu epics, **Padma Shri Gafaruddin Mewati Jogi** keeps alive a rare syncretic folk tradition — singing Mahabharat ballads on the bhapang, a one-string instrument that echoes centuries of storytelling in Mewat

Avijit.Ghosh@timesofindia.com

Photos: Piyal Bhattacharjee

Gafaruddin Mewati Jogi (second from right) with his son Shaharukh (L), and two grandsons

The earliest sounds of melody that coursed through Gafaruddin Mewati Jogi were the devotional songs his mother sang as lullabies — "*Ghar aa gaye Lachhman Ram* (Laxman and Ram have returned home)." He still remembers the lines. They are his childhood muscle memory.

His second memory is watching his father Buddh Singh Jogi perform at the homes of sarpanch and jagirdars of neighbouring villages in the Mewat region. "He was so popular that people would finalise wedding dates only after checking whether he was free to perform that night," he recalls. His father passed away in 2004. But Gafaruddin, who became a Padma Shri last month, has carried the baton forward, helping preserve a rare syncretic heritage.

Gafaruddin belongs to a community of folk singers known as Mewati Jogis — Muslim musicians who conventionally use both Hindu and Muslim names, and play the rare folk instrument, bhapang. They perform devotional songs, especially 'Pandun Ka Kada', an epic ballad drawn from stories in the Mahabharat. This tradition of storytelling has remained popular for centuries across Mewat, which today includes the districts of Nuh, Gurgaon, Palwal, Bharatpur, and Alwar across Haryana and Rajasthan. Gafaruddin remembers 2,500 couplets from the epic.

Folk Legacy In One String

The bhapang is a versatile solo string percussion instrument. Gafaruddin makes it talk. Placing it below his arm, he coaxes out sounds, high and low, tenor and bass. He is over 60 but plays with the enthusiasm of a child. His fingers move in an interchanging rhythm, but his eyes dance like a dervish. The bearded singer-musician's rendition challenges the higher octaves and feels like the grainy texture of rustic earth that he belongs to.

Gafaruddin's music also has the power to engage. After performing with master percussionist Pete Lockett in London at an event celebrating the late Queen's birthday some years ago, he was strolling when a woman, enraptured by his skills, hugged him tight. "She wouldn't let me go," he smiles.

Remembrances like these are freeze-framed in Gafaruddin's memory. Wearing a safa (a multicoloured Rajasthani pugree) and a light pink kurta, he opens the door to the past like a granny slowly unlocking her jewel box. Like his recollection of Lata Mangeshkar. Many years ago, Gafaruddin had been invited to perform at the Master Dinanath music festival in Goa, where he met the prima donna of Hindi film music. "She told me that our classical music too has its roots in folk music. 'Keep your music alive'." He pauses and says, "It would have been great had I received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award from her." Lata passed away in 2022, two years before he received the award announced earlier.

At Home With Music

A small streamer congratulating Gafaruddin marks the entrance of Alwar's Tiger colony. He was born in Kaithwara village in Deeg district in eastern Rajasthan, once the summer retreat of the Jat kings, but moved to Alwar town, about 75km away, after marriage.

Gafaruddin's house stands at the end of a lane, near a neem tree and a garbage dump. It's among the smaller houses in the colony, but another Padma Shri banner, a bigger one, posted outside his home makes it taller in stature.

The blue sitting room — barely 10ft by 12ft — is overcrowded with furniture and mementoes. An artfully woven charpoi stands out as the centrepiece. Gafaruddin, who also plays the Jogiya sarangi and the Mewati chikara, sits on the bed, a bunch of bhapangs from different eras arranged before him.

In shape, they resemble the damroo, the small hourglass-like drum associated with Lord Shiva. The oldest among them is carved out of a hollowed bottle gourd. The modern version of the instrument is carved from sheesham (rosewood) or mango wood, materials that offer greater durability and resonance. The base is sealed with leather, and a string — once made of animal gut, now replaced with nylon — is fixed at the centre of the stretched skin. The string runs through the inside of the instrument and is plucked taut with a finger or a *kidli*, a small plectrum, producing a mélange of sounds. "The wooden version produces a stronger sound, which reaches out to more people. That is why we shifted to it," he says.

Gafaruddin also sings 'eco-friendly' songs — which underline the virtues of trees and water. One of his songs goes, "*Jal heera, jal johri… dekho jal bin jagat kangal* (Water is diamond and the jeweller, the world is a pauper without water)".

His father was famous, but money flowed in a trickle. "For a performance, he would get anything between Rs 5 and Rs 21. Sometimes we received wheat, pulses, vegetables, even clothes," he says. Those were different days. Many years later, actor-filmmaker Akbar Khan saw him play the bhapang in Jaipur and used his sounds for his TV serial, 'Akbar the Great' (1988-91). "I was paid Rs 5,000," he says.

Now he takes a higher fee — sometimes Rs 40,000 for a recital. On average, he gets one-two shows a month, says his son Shaharukh, whose granny, having seen 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge', named him after the film's hero. Shaharukh plays the bhapang and offers supporting vocals to his father's main act. Beyond the stage, he serves as an informal archivist of his community's history, preserving oral traditions that might otherwise fade. "The govt should build a school for Mewati Jogi musicians," he says, "It's important to carry the tradition forward in a proper way."

His two young sons are already learning the craft, absorbing rhythms as naturally as breathing. The four deliver an impromptu performance — unfazed by the honking of eager motorbikes and the grunts of uncaring buffaloes. Yet in a strange way, they become part of the soundtrack, blending into the music rather than interrupting it.

Gafaruddin is largely a contented man. But reading his older interviews, one spots a nagging complaint: the absence of higher govt recognition. Last month, with the Padma Shri announcement, that grievance was put to bed. "I am just a singer from the village. I am thankful to PM Narendra Modi-ji for the award. Earlier govts didn't think about it. But he did," he says.

The award hasn't translated into a higher demand for concert bookings. But Gafaruddin has fielded more interview requests in recent weeks than ever before. The positive fallouts, interestingly, have happened in unexpected areas. Shaharukh says, "When people in our colony make a complaint about garbage or power cuts, they say, '*Padma Shri ke colony mein bhi bijli nahi hai*. (Even in a Padma Shri's colony, there's no electricity)." On most occasions, the problem is fixed.

INQUIZITIVE

JOY BHATTACHARJYA

1 Which Nazirite, the subject of a poem by John Milton and a 1949 Hollywood film, was betrayed by his lover and blinded, but still managed to pull down the temple of Dagon and kill his enemies, the Philistines?

2 The SBI logo is widely believed to have been inspired by Kankaria Lake, with its distinct keyhole shape. In which city would you come across this lake?

3 What name did Puerto Rican Enrique Morales use to hit stardom with his Grammy-winning album 'Vuelve' in 1998, starting what came to be known as the 'Latin Explosion' in global music?

4 Which country's tourist influx increased by 40% between 2000 and 2006 primarily because of international tourists visiting the locales of a film franchise?

5 In Hindu mythology, what is the name of the ruler of the sky and the upholder of cosmic laws, who is often jointly invoked in prayer with the deity Mitra?

6 What five-letter name is given to a structure on the shore of a harbour or bank of a river where ships may dock to load and unload cargo or passengers?

7 What four-letter word could mean a floating barrier, an obstacle used in marine navigation, a type of microphone, a 2003 film with Amitabh Bachchan in a guest role, and, when used twice, the name of a hit Nazia and Zoheb Hassan song from the film 'Star'?

8 Which Scottish name connects a famous college in Pune founded by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other luminaries with a legendary sports personality who managed the same team from 1986 to 2012, though the spellings of the two differ slightly?

9 The SI unit of electrical inductance shares its name with eight English kings. Just name it.

10 Which eight-letter word originated from the French meaning a warrior or athlete who was appointed to do battle on behalf of others? Historically, the King's _____ in England defended the monarch's right to the throne.

ANSWERS

1 | Samson
2 | Ahmedabad
3 | Ricky Martin
4 | New Zealand, Lord of the Rings
5 | Varuna
6 | Wharf
7 | Boom, Boom
8 | Fergusson and Alex Ferguson
9 | Henry
10 | Champion

VOICES OF STRENGTH

Goals, grit and the work behind success

SIMATS MARKS INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WITH EMPOWHER HONOURS FOR WOMEN ACHIEVERS

Dr N M Veeraiyan speaking at the event

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The International Women's Day at Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences (SIMATS) was a confluence of women achievers whose excellence in their chosen paths and contributions have left an indelible mark. The event, held in association with The Times of India, witnessed the honouring of women who have excelled in the fields of healthcare, science, social work, education, music, entrepreneurship and sports by conferring upon them the EMPOWHER Awards. Ernst & Young LLP served as process advisor for the awards, defining the categories and governing the process.

Indian badminton player Saina Nehwal was the chief guest for the occasion. Playback singer K S Chithra; Indian aerospace engineer Nigar Shaji; social entrepreneur Santhi Duraisamy; and emeritus professor of paediatrics and neonatology Dr Shasni N Vani were honoured with Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Delivering the inaugural address, Saina Nehwal stressed the importance of hard work and consistency. "Keep your goals to yourself. Do not discuss them with everyone. Work quietly towards them and one day your work will speak for itself," she added. She noted that while today's generation is smart and intelligent, many spend excessive time watching reels and often neglect their physical fitness. Unlike in several other countries, where people work on their fitness by going to the gym before or after college or office hours, young people here are not always serious about it. "If we focus more on our fitness and take care of our health, along with eating good food, we can stay healthy. Sport also gives you focus. There is a lot of stress, and taking up sport can help you stay focused and mentally relaxed, especially for young people," she added.

Delivering his presidential address, Dr N M Veeraiyan, founder and chancellor of SIMATS, quoted poet Subramania Bharathi and reminded the audience that one had to perform great deeds and possess great credentials even to be born as a woman. He said, "Therefore, a woman should feel proud of her work and live her life with happiness, confidence and dignity."

Saina Nehwal addressing the gathering

The event also included a panel discussion featuring woman racing champion Alisha Abdulla, classical and playback singer Charulatha Mani, and dental and endodontics specialist Dr Krithika Datta. During the discussions, Abdulla said she found it not easy to decide what advice she could offer children, adding that raising girl children would not be easy either. Dr Datta pointed out that much of the discrimination women suffered was self-inflicted and that during troubled times, women had to take a break, detach, and reflect deeply before resuming their work. She added that even today, not many men or young boys are able to handle successful or strong women. Charulatha Mani said women had nothing to worry if they were bold and courageous.

Recipients of the EMPOWHER Achievement Awards

- GAYATHRI—For excellence in dance and the performing arts, and for her contribution to preserving and modernising the traditional art form.
- GAYATHRI THAKOOR—For transforming education and learning through creative expression across 15 states in the country.
- GUNIT SINGLA—For her entrepreneurship in the hospital and services sector.
- GUHA PRADEEPA RAJENDRA PRABHU—For contributions to diabetes research.
- S J JANANIY—For excellence in music and for her contributions to Indian music.
- JAYASHREE MATHIMARAN—For contributions to Indian cinema and television, and for promoting Tamil language and culture.
- JOLLY DHAR—For technology and management leadership in space technology.
- A K KASTHURBA—For her contribution to sustainability and climate action.
- V NAGARANI—For her outstanding contribution to inclusive social development for 20 years, benefiting over 2 lakh lives.
- Dr NITI KRISHNA RAIZADA—For excellence in integrated cancer care.
- P V SARANYA— For pioneering work and initiatives to take technology to people in rural areas.
- M SASIKALA—For her work in STEM research and applied innovations.
- Shilpa Indoria—For her contribution to transforming education for over two decades.
- SNEHA BHARTI—For being a changemaker at the grassroots through education and development initiatives.
- SNEHA MOHANDOSS—For her contribution towards building a hunger-free nation.
- SWEETY SHARMA—For her contribution to powerlifting and for breaking barriers in a traditionally male-dominated sport.

K S Chithra receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award

Shanthi Duraisamy being conferred with the Lifetime Achievement Award

The event begins with the traditional lamp lighting

Nigar Shaji being presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award

Dr Shashi N Vani accepting the Lifetime Achievement Award

Grace in every step

The stage comes alive

Panel discussion on next-generation women leaders: What needs to change now

All ears and eyes

Govt eyes trust reset with Ladakh leaders after Wangchuk's release

Decision Comes Just Days Before SC Hearing On Habeas Petition Filed By Wife

Ajay Parmar & Bharti Jain | TNN

Activist Sonam Wangchuk was released from prison on Saturday

Jodhpur/New Delhi: The Centre's move to free activist Sonam Wangchuk is expected to placate members of the Ladakh Apex Body, who had been complaining that no follow-up talks were scheduled to take the dialogue forward on constitutional and other safeguards for the Union territory after the round in early Feb.

The decision came just three days before the next hearing in Supreme Court on the habeas corpus petition filed by Wangchuk's wife challenging his imprisonment.

Sources said the govt's stance in letting Wangchuk walk free is expected to heal any mistrust in LAB regarding the former's intention to find an amicable solution that takes care of the interests of all sections of Ladakh, adding that it would, simultaneously, strengthen locals' belief in LAB's ability to extract the best terms.

A source said the home ministry heard the latter's demands, including for statehood and Sixth Schedule status, and had explained their legal and financial limitations, at last month's meeting.

The Ladakh representatives were told to come back with a revised proposal indicating the financial viability of their demands. However, a senior govt official claims, they instead accused the Centre of failing to call them for the next round of dialogue. "The politicisation of the dialogue through bandhs/protests and the legal challenge to Wangchuk's detention only added to the atmosphere of mistrust. Freeing Wangchuk should ease the protests and put the dialogue process back on track," the senior govt official told **TOI**.

The Centre said Saturday it has been actively engaging with various stakeholders and community figures in Ladakh with a view to addressing the aspirations and concerns of the people of the region. "However, the prevailing atmosphere of bandhs and protests has been detrimental to the peaceloving character of the society and has adversely affected various sections of the community, including students, job aspirants, businesses, tour operators and tourists, and the overall economy," the govt conceded.

The govt said it "reiterates its commitment to providing all necessary safeguards for Ladakh. It remains hopeful that the issues concerning the region will be resolved through constructive engagement and dialogue, including through the mechanism of the high-powered committee as well as other appropriate platforms".

Ladakh LG Vinai Kumar Saxena described the decision to release Sonam Wangchuk as a "positive step" by the Centre towards fostering peace and mutual trust. Saxena said all concerns can be resolved amicably through constructive dialogue and mutual understanding, and that there was no place for agitation, bandhs, or violence in Ladakh.

Wangchuk had reiterated his commitment to Ladakh in a post on X on March 12: "I have not stepped away from activism. My commitment to Ladakh remains unchanged. But activism must serve a larger purpose: a just, lasting future for Ladakh. It will require clarity, unity, and sincere dialogue. Our struggle has always been for Ladakh's protection, dignity, and long-term wellbeing and shall continue to be!!"

Welcoming his release, former Rajasthan chief minister and Congress politician Ashok Gehlot also took to social media, writing, "The news of activist Sonam Wangchuk's release is welcome, but the entire episode raises serious questions about the functioning of the Modi-led central govt. The person who, a few months ago, was put behind bars after being described as a 'threat to the nation's security' is now suddenly being released, which implies that no evidence was found against him. In such a situation, who will account for the 170 days of his detention? Why was he arrested in the first place?"

Guj HC allows jail inmate to go home for pet's funeral

Ahmedabad: The Gujarat HC Friday ordered the temporary release of a man from Lajpore Central Jail in Surat, granting him a few hours under police escort to perform the last rites of his pet dog.

The man was in judicial custody after his estranged wife accused him of defrauding her of more than Rs 17 lakh. He is charged with withdrawing the proceeds of her life insurance policy through forged signatures.

His lawyer filed a regular bail application before the high court on March 10. On Friday, however, his legal team appeared before Justice Utkarsh Desai with an urgent plea seeking his temporary release. They submitted that the dog had been with the man for about 14 years and that he was deeply attached to the pet. He wished to go home to carry out its last rites. The request was framed on humanitarian grounds.

After hearing the submission, Justice Desai ordered: "The applicant is hereby directed to be taken to his house at Surat today (March 13) with police custody immediately upon receipt of this order till 8pm." TNN

Gurugram engineer kills sister, calls mom to see 'surprise'

Sandeep.Rai
@timesofindia.com

Meerut: Days after a 25-year-old HPCL engineer was arrested in Moradabad soon for allegedly murdering his twin sister in a knife attack, details from the post-mortem report brought out the extent of the assault. Senior police officers said It was one of the "most brutal murder sites" they have come across in their career.

Moradabad (City) SP Kumar Ranvijay said, "The post-mortem report revealed the extent of the assault. Doctors found at least 50 deep stab wounds on Himshikha's neck, chest, abdomen, arms, legs, shoulders and face. Several vital organs, including the heart, liver and kidneys, were severely damaged. Almost no part of the body was spared."

Police said the attack took place on the evening of March 7 and that the motive was linked to a failed relationship. During the investigation, they found that the accused, Hardik Malhotra, had been in an online relationship with a woman from another faith for the past seven months.

Police said the two allegedly communicated through social media and never met in person. A few weeks before the killing, the relationship ended, leaving him disturbed. Investigators said Himshikha had counselled him to focus on his career. The two worked together in Gurugram and stayed together, and during questioning Hardik told police that he had left his job as a software engineer a year ago while his sister continued working. He said he wanted to build a career in social media content development.

Originally from Badaun, the siblings had come to their home in Moradabad for Holi. The twins had been living in Gurugram, where Himshikha worked in a private firm and was also preparing for MBA exams. Police said another argument broke out between them on the same issue, following which Hardik picked up a kitchen knife and attacked her. Their mother, who had separated from her husband years ago, worked as an assistant manager in a private insurance firm in Moradabad.

Wangchuk's release: 'Anti-national' stigma from struggle for statehood removed, say Ladakh groups

Naseer Ganai
@timesofindia.com

Srinagar: The Centre's decision to revoke National Security Act (NSA) against climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and release him removes the "anti-national" stigma from Ladakh people's struggle for statehood and Sixth Schedule status, Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) said Saturday.

The region's two key politico-religious groups called the move, however, an "incomplete" step and claimed the relief for Wangchuk, an LAB member, was given as the Centre had failed to prove in Supreme Court that he was involved in anti-national acts. "We welcome this order. But the govt was losing this case in the apex court. That is why they took this decision," LAB co-chairman Chering Dorjay Lakrook said.

Supreme Court has been hearing a petition by Wangchuk's wife Gitanjali Angmo challenging his detention since Sept 26, 2025, two days after violence erupted during protests in Leh over statehood and Sixth Schedule status. The court will take up the case again on Tuesday. Four people died and over 80 were injured in alleged police firing on protesters.

"Govt accused our movement of being anti-national. Previous LG (Kavinder Gupta) also talked on the same lines. We have been vindicated by this order (NSA revocation) that there was nothing anti-national in our struggle," Lakrook said.

However, he announced that a March 16 rally in Ladakh against the detention and the alleged delay in talks with the Centre would go on as planned.

Reacting to the Union Govt's announcement revoking the detention of Wangchuk under the National Security Act, Congress said that the Narendra Modi govt "stands fully exposed". Congress general secretary, communications, Jairam Ramesh, said in a statement on X, "Congress had condemned the arrest of Sonam Wangchuk six months back. Now the Narendra Modi govt has done a total U-turn. It stands fully exposed. It should apologise to not only Mr Wangchuk and his family, but to the people of Ladakh as well."

Inputs from Sanjay Khajuria in Jammu

Omar, Mehbooba unite on Iran, Sonam

Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah and former CM Mehbooba Mufti Saturday found rare common ground on the issue of release of environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk and the situation in Iran, **reports Naseer Ganai.**

Omar said the war "imposed on the people of Iran" should end immediately. "We want this unjust war forced on the people of Iran to end," he told reporters here on the sidelines of a function, adding that the US and Israel cannot decide who should lead Iran.

About the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Omar said he was not only the leader of Iran but also a widely respected religious leader of Muslims. "So, this should not be seen merely as a war with Iran. It has far wider implications," he said. About Wangchuk, Omar said he should not have been arrested in the first place.

100 stray dogs poisoned to death in T'gana

Hyderabad: In yet another incident of stray dog killings, nearly 100 canines were allegedly "poisoned to death" in Mancherial district, police said.

An animal welfare activist, A Goutham, in a complaint to police, stated that on the intervening night of March 7-8 around 100 stray dogs were killed in Kishtapur village.

The complainant, working as Cruelty Prevention Manager with the Stray Animal Foundation of India (NGO) accused that the Sarpanch and Gram Panchayath Secretary of Kishtapur village, hired two persons and killed the stray dogs by giving poisonous injections and buried them near a river. PTI

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In first photo together, Andrew and UK politician Mandelson are seen in bathrobes with Epstein amid an intensifying scandal over their ties

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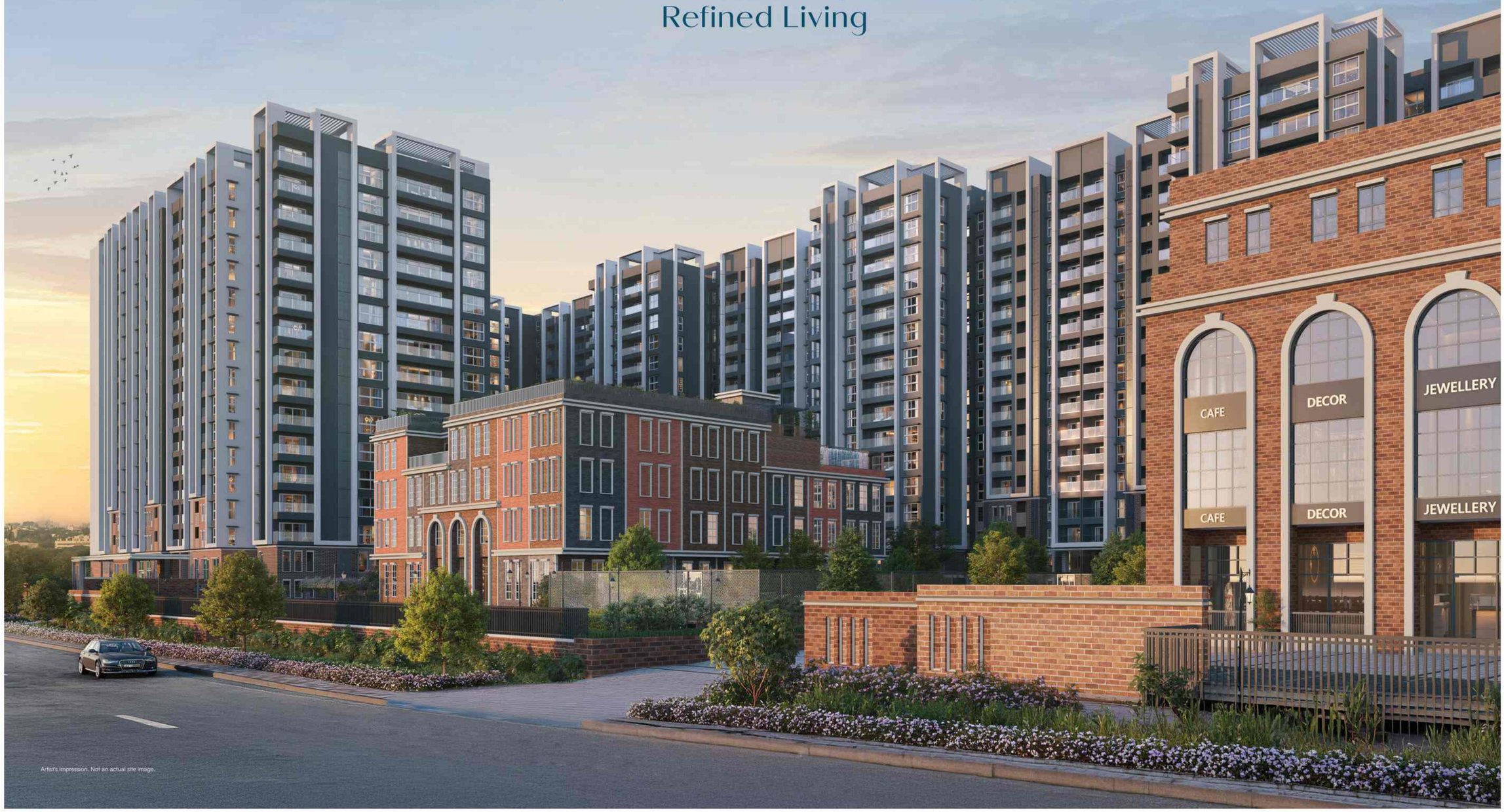

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Vijay's TVK denies any scope for alliance with NDA in Tamil Nadu. Party member Nirmal Kumar says 'BJP is our ideological enemy'

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WORLD ECONOMY AFTER 15 DAYS OF IRAN WAR

US to import fertilizer from Venezuela

Washington on Friday **authorised imports of fertilizer from Venezuela, whose leader it deposed in Jan, as the US-Israel war against Iran drives up prices of the key agricultural commodity.** Washington has issued new licences as part of the ongoing easing of its sanctions on Venezuela's energy sector. In addition to oil and gas, the licenses now include trade in fertilizers, including urea and phosphates

Brent surges 11% over week

The price of a barrel of Brent crude, the international benchmark for oil, **soared by 11% over the week to $103.14 at Friday's close**, while stocks slipped

Only 77 ships traversed Hormuz in March

Only 77 ships have so far crossed the Strait of Hormuz in March as the war disrupts one of the world's most vital shipping routes, says maritime data firm Lloyd's List Intelligence. Most of these vessels belonged to the so-called shadow fleet — ships used to skirt Western sanctions. **In the first 12 days of March 2025, around 1,229 vessels passed through the waterway**

Serbia, Portugal cut fuel tax

Serbia's govt temporarily cut fuel taxes by 20%, with its energy ministry saying the excise duties on petrol and diesel would be reduced from Friday until April 15. **Portugal also said it was renewing a temporary cut to fuel taxes**, with officials adding that the cut would apply to petrol and diesel

Africa stares at limited oil reserves

Fuel shortages caused by the war could knock up to three percentage points off African economic growth if they persist, a top regional energy regulator told AFP on Friday. **Most African countries have fuel reserves for just 15 to 25 days, compared to the International Energy Agency standard of 90 days**, said Geoffrey Aori, CEO of the Regional Association of Energy Regulators for Eastern and Southern Africa

20 ships attacked
Twenty oil tankers and cargo ships have been attacked since the war began, according to AFP monitoring with British maritime security group UKTMO and other sources

Rural Aus faces fuel shortage

Australia's energy minister Chris Bowen said rural and regional areas are facing "real and unacceptable shortages" of fuel. **Demand is "up 100% at every terminal across Australia," causing shortages for farmers. The country, which relies on oil imports for fuel, has seen petrol prices spike due to panic buying.** Australia holds 1.6 billion litres of petrol, the equivalent of 37 days of supply, up from 36 days in the last report

6 million air passengers affected

More than six million air passengers travelling to or from the Middle East have had their flights cancelled since the start of the war, according to aviation data specialist Cirium. **It said more than 52,000 out of 98,000 scheduled flights have been called off**

Iran repeats retaliation threat as US hits island military infra

US Orders 2,500 Marines, Amphibious Assault Ship To Mideast

Iran warned it will target American-linked oil and energy facilities in the Middle East if its own infrastructure is attacked, reiterating its threat after the US bombed military targets on the critical outpost of Kharg Island.

"All oil, economic, and energy facilities belonging to oil companies in the region that are partly owned by the United States or that cooperate with the United States will be immediately destroyed and reduced to ashes" if Iran's energy and economic assets are hit, the semi-official Fars News Agency cited the central military command as saying.

After the attack on military assets, US President Donald Trump threatened additional strikes on Iran's oil facilities on the island if Tehran continued to interfere with ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz.

Kharg Island is off the coast of the Iranian mainland and deep in the Persian Gulf. Oil pipelines that terminate there handle the vast majority of Iran's energy exports, making it crucial for the country's economy.

15 explosions reported

Fars separately reported that more than 15 explosions shook the island, sending thick pillars of smoke into the sky. The agency said the attacks targeted the island's air defense systems, a naval base, the airport control tower, and a helicopter hangar, but it did not immediately report any casualties or the scale of the damage.

Ehsan Jahaniyan, deputy governor of Iran's southern Bushehr province, said that after the attacks "daily life and routine activities of the residents are also fully maintained." The attack did not cause any casualties among military personnel, company employees, or residents of Kharg island, he added.

The American threat to strike one of the most critical pillars of the Islamic Republic's economy marks a fresh escalation in Tehran's war with Israel and the US. On Friday, Trump said the US would continue its campaign as long as necessary, while also insisting the campaign is "way ahead of schedule."

The president also suggested the US Navy would begin escorting ships through the Strait of Hormuz "very soon."

The US military has ordered 2,500 marines from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and the amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli to the Middle East, according to an US official, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. Marine Expeditionary Units are able to conduct amphibious landings, but they also specialise in bolstering security at embassies, evacuating civilians and disaster relief.

IRAN SENDS OVER 90% OF KHARG CRUDE OIL TO CHINA

Kharg Island
- **A 22-sqkm coral outcrop in the Bushehr province,** located about 25 km off Iran's Gulf coast
- **Handles 90% of Iran's exports,** hosts the country's main oil export terminal, storage tanks & tanker loading jetties

Production facilities
- **Oil** – Khuzestan
- **Natural Gas** - South Pars gas Field

Exports crude mainly to:
- China (more than 90% of exports), Syria, UAE, Venezuela

Iran's oil and gas production
- **Crude output:** 3.3 million barrels per day
- Condensate and other liquids — 1.3 million bpd
- **Capacity of domestic refineries:** 2.6 million bpd; **pumps about 4.5% of global oil supplies**
- **Gas production:** 276 billion cubic meters in 2024; 94% gas is consumed domestically

'Kharg attacked from UAE'

Iran issued an evacuation warning for three major ports in the United Arab Emirates on Saturday, including the busiest in the Middle East, openly threatening a neighbouring country's non-US assets for the first time as its war with the US and Israel entered its third week.

Iran said the US had used "ports, docks and hideouts" in the UAE to launch strikes on Iran's Kharg Island, without providing evidence. It urged people to evacuate areas where it said US forces were sheltering. Hours after the threat, there was no sign of an attack on Dubai's Jebel Ali port — the Mideast's busiest — or Khalifa in Abu Dhabi.

Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi told MS NOW the US attacked Kharg Island and Abu Musa Island with low-range artillery from two locations in the UAE, Ras Al-Khaimah and a place "very close to Dubai," calling that dangerous and saying Iran "will try to be careful not to attack any populated area" there.

Kharg oil exports 'normal'

Oil export operations from Kharg island in the Gulf were proceeding as normal Saturday after US strikes on the crude export hub which caused no casualties, a regional official said.

Two oil tankers were berthed at Kharg hours after the US attacks there, according to Tankertrackers.com, a firm that specialises in studying satellite imagery to follow ship movements. Both were observed mid morning local time on Saturday. Neither vessel was there on Friday, said its co-founder Samir Madani. AP, BLOOMBERG, AFP

Trump admin lashes out at CNN over war

Washington: The Pentagon and White House slammed CNN over its Iran war coverage Friday — with defence secretary Pete Hegseth saying he looked forward to an ally of President Donald Trump taking over the news network.

Hegseth spent part of a news conference on US military operations against Tehran criticising the media and CNN in particular, urging for what he called an "actual patriotic press."

The former Fox News host was particularly incensed by a story the channel ran suggesting Washington had underestimated Iran's ability to disrupt global oil traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. "Patently ridiculous," Hegseth told reporters, before adding: "The sooner David Ellison takes over that network, the better."

David Ellison is the head of Paramount Skydance, which is set to complete a landmark takeover of Warner Bros Discovery, the current owner of CNN. Ellison had vowed to protect CNN's editorial independence. AFP

Iran: 2 more footballers pull asylum bids

Two more players of the Iranian women's football team, which competed in the Asian Cup in Australia, and one member of the backroom staff have withdrawn their requests for asylum in the country, Iranian state media said on Saturday. Seven members of the visiting women's football delegation — six players and one backroom staff member — had sought sanctuary in Australia after they were branded "traitors" at home for refusing to sing the national anthem during the ongoing war between Iran and the US and its ally Israel. AFP

Israel says Iran war entering 'decisive phase'

Claims Hezbollah Using Ambulances, Hospitals As Cover

Israel said the war against Iran was entering its "decisive phase" on Saturday, as explosions rocked cities across the Middle East, with strikes on the American embassy in Baghdad and a major Emirati energy facility.

Washington's embassy in Iraq was hit by a drone, security sources said, the second time it has been targeted since Feb 28, when the United States and Israel attacked Iran and plunged the Gulf into a conflict that has sent shockwaves through the global economy.

Clouds of black smoke rose Saturday over Fujairah, home to a major Emirati oil storage and export terminal, shortly after Iran's military warned UAE civilians to avoid port areas.

The Israeli military warned on Saturday that it may strike ambulances and medical facilities which it said were being used unlawfully by Hezbollah in Lebanon, though it did not provide evidence for the claim. "As part of its terrorist activities, Hezbollah is using ambulances extensively for military purposes," the Israeli military's Arabic spokesman Avichai Adraee said on X.

AP

A fire and plume of smoke rise after, according to authorities, debris from an intercepted Iranian drone struck an oil facility in Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, Saturday

Israeli strikes since March 2 killed 826 people: Lebanon

Lebanon's health ministry said Saturday that Israeli strikes have killed 826 people, including 65 women and 106 children, since the start of the war with Hezbollah, adding that 2,009 others were wounded. A ministry statement said 31 paramedics were among the dead, raising an earlier toll after the bodies of additional health workers were found following an overnight strike that authorities said hit a healthcare centre in the country's south. AFP

Getty Images via AFP

AL QUDS DAY IN NY: People gather in New York City on Friday for a rally on al Quds Day, an annual event to express support for Palestinians and opposition to Israeli control over Jerusalem

N Korea fires over 10 ballistic missiles as US drills continue

North Korea fired more than 10 ballistic missiles toward the East Sea, days after testing cruise missiles from a new warship and adding to global geopolitical risks that were already mounting after the US and Israel attacked Iran. The missiles were launched from the Sunan area near Pyongyang, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The launch coincided with annual US–South Korea military exercises that are running from March 9-19. It also comes in a week when the US reportedly moved some air-defence assets out of South Korea for Mideast operations. BLOOMBERG

Greek oil tanker sailing to Russia hit

A Greek oil tanker was damaged by a projectile or drone in the Black Sea as it sailed toward Russia, Greece's shipping ministry said. The ship is currently sailing under its own steam. The crew of 24 is safe. Tankers in the Black Sea have become targets of Ukrainian attacks in recent months as the administration in Kyiv expands the scope of its strikes on Russian oil infra.

Kyiv explains oil line attack

Ukraine Saturday said it had briefed diplomats from 31 countries on the damage caused to the Druzhba pipeline that pumps Russian oil to Europe, amid a row with Hungary and Slovakia over a halt in supplies. BLOOMBERG, AFP

Drone debris injure 4 in Pak

Islamabad: At least four persons were injured when hit by the debris of the Afghan Taliban drones which were destroyed before reaching their targets, the Pak Army said on Saturday. The drones were intercepted and destroyed on Friday in Quetta, Kohat and Rawalpindi, adjacent to the capital Islamabad. PTI

US-made launcher fired missiles from Bahrain, video shows

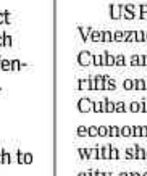
Vivian Nereim, Aric Toler and John Ismay

A video verified by The New York Times shows ballistic missiles being launched from Bahrain in the direction of Iran, in what appears to be the first confirmed instance of an attack on the Islamic Republic originating from a Persian Gulf country since the war began. Bahrain is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet. It is unclear from the video alone whether the US or Bahraini military fired the missiles. Defense experts who have reviewed the footage say that at least one of the missiles was fired from US-made equipment. The govt of Bahrain told the Times that its military "has not participated in any offensive operations." NYT

Trump to other nations: Send warships to secure Hormuz

US President Trump on Saturday urged other nations to send ships to help secure the Strait of Hormuz, the critical chokepoint for global oil supplies disrupted by the Mideast war.

Trump, who has said the United States will soon start escorting tankers through the strait, posted on Truth Social that "Many countries, especially those who are affected by Iran's attempted closure of the Hormuz Strait, will be sending War Ships, in conjunction with the United States of America, to keep the Strait open and safe."



The US president added: "Hopefully China, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and others, that are affected by this artificial constraint, will send Ships to the area."

Iranian strikes have all but halted maritime traffic in the strait, through which a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas normally pass. It is just 54km wide at its narrowest point. With oil prices spiking, Trump was asked Friday when the US Navy would begin escorting tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. "It'll happen soon, very soon," he said.

In his post on Saturday, Trump asserted that Iran's military capability had been eliminated but he conceded that it was still able to attack. "We have already destroyed 100% of Iran's Military capability, but it's easy for them to send a drone or two, drop a mine, or deliver a close range missile somewhere along, or in, this Waterway, no matter how badly defeated they are."

As he urged nations to send ships to the strait, he added that "the United States will be bombing the hell out of the shoreline, and continually shooting Iranian Boats and Ships out of the water. One way or the other, we will soon get the Hormuz Strait OPEN, SAFE, and FREE!"

US allies have been reluctant to provide military support to the US-Israeli attacks on Iran, but they have mobilised warships in response to the widening conflict. AFP

Hamas to Iran: Do not target Arab neighbours

Cairo: The Palestinian Iran-aligned militant group Hamas has called on Iran to not target neighbouring countries, while still reaffirming Tehran's right to respond to the US-Israeli attacks.

This is the first time the group has publicly commented on Iranian policies. It has expressed solidarity with Iran during the war but appeared to steer clear from threatening any retaliatory actions so far. It also called on all countries in the region and international organisations to immediately stop the war. Israel and Hamas agreed on a ceasefire in Gaza that went into effect in October, but there have been regular outbreaks of violence since then. REUTERS

Iran's leaders defy Trump with bellicose talk & public parades

Within the span of a few hours on Thursday, Iran's new supreme leader said he'd keep one of the world's most important energy chokepoints closed and its head of national security said the country could plunge the whole Middle East into darkness, and hunt down US troops "running for safety."

On Friday, senior leaders marched through the streets of Tehran in broad daylight, with thousands of others, for an annual pro-Palestinian event that state media showed as also being a pro-govt rally.

It was a show of defiance toward the US and Israel, which have vowed to kill more Iranian officials after assassinating supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the opening strikes of the war. Those walking about, some of them taking selfies with Iranians, included President Masoud Pezeshkian, Ali Larijani, who is head of the Supreme National Security Council, and foreign minister Abbas Araghchi.

After two weeks of being pummelled by American and Israeli bombs, the Islamic Republic shows no sign of seeking an off-ramp. Its counter strikes across the region have spooked global oil and bond markets, raised pump prices in the US, and shaken confidence in Gulf financial hubs.

Iran "may have conveyed a false impression of weakness and incapacity," said Mira Al Hussein, as associate fellow at the Alwaleed Centre, University of Edinburgh. BLOOMBERG

DAILY PLANET

US convicts 9 for immigration centre attack

Nine people were convicted on Friday of involvement in an attack last year on an immigration detention center in the southern US state of Texas that authorities blamed on the left-wing Antifa movement. A federal jury in Fort Worth, Texas, found the defendants guilty of various charges including rioting, using weapons and explosives, obstruction and providing material support to terrorists, the justice department said.

Election work for UN secy gen to start next month

Five candidates have been nominated to vie to become the next United Nations secretary-general, taking over the organisation at a time of crises around the world and within it, and the election process will start next month, according to General Assembly president Annalena Baerbock.

US to receive $10billion fee for TikTok deal

The US is slated to receive around $10 billion as a fee from investors as part of the recently completed deal for China's ByteDance to sell the American operations of the social video app TikTok to a consortium of US investors, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

Razzies for remakes of 'Snow White', 'War of the Worlds'

Bizarre remakes of 'Snow White' and 'War of the Worlds' have topped the Razzies, the anti-Hollywood awards show that annually shames the industry's very worst films. Disney's latest live-action remake of "Snow White" had been mired in controversies years before its disappointing release nearly a year ago. Its star Rachel Zegler enraged Disney fans for comments denigrating the beloved 1937 original — even labelling its Prince a stalker.

US Army awards Anduril contract worth $20 billion

The US Army has awarded Anduril Industries a contract with a total value of as much as $20 billion to buy the defence startup's software, hardware and services that the defence department said would speed delivery of tech to soldiers. "To maintain our advantage, we must be able to acquire and deploy software capabilitie," the dept said.

Communist party's office attacked in Cuba over outages

Havana: Anti-govt protesters attacked a Communist party office in northern Cuba early on Saturday, a state-run newspaper said, in a rare outburst of dissent triggered by worsening blackouts, exacerbated by a US oil blockade.

A rally against power cuts and food shortages appeared to begin peacefully in the city of Moron late on Friday then turned violent in the early hours of Saturday morning, Invasor newspaper said. Videos on social media showed a large fire and people throwing rocks through the windows of a building as voices shouted "liberty" in the background. Reuters was unable to confirm the authenticity of videos that posters said showed unrest in Moron.

US President Trump cut off Venezuelan oil shipments to Cuba and threatened to slap tariffs on any country that sells Cuba oil, piling pressure on the economy already struggling with shortages of food, electricity and medicine. The Cuban govt said Friday it had begun talks with Washington to try to defuse the crisis. REUTERS

Quest to identify artist Banksy uncovers much more than a name

The identity of Banksy, one of the world's most popular and enigmatic artists, has been debated and closely guarded for decades. Once an annoyance to authorities who viewed him as a vandal, he has become a British national treasure. Many tried to uncover his identity but Banksy and his inner circle won't talk about it. Some have signed non-disclosure agreements.

IS THIS THE FACE THAT... Robin Gunningham

Others keep quiet out of loyalty, or fear of crossing the artist, his fans and his influential company, Pest Control Office, which authenticates his work. "Working anonymously or under a pseudonym serves vital societal interests," says his lawyer.

Reuters interviewed a dozen Banksy-world insiders and experts, examined photos of the artist, most of which obscured his face but contained critical information. The investigation uncovered US court records from a 2000 arrest in New York for vandalising a billboard. The handwritten confession and police documents clearly identified the culprit as Robin Gunningham. The Bristol native had been "unmasked" as Banksy in 2008 by The Mail on Sunday, and the Reuters investigation too directs to him.

Court files, bail records and the signed statement repeatedly carried Gunningham's name, providing the clearest documentary link yet between the elusive street artist and a real identity. The incident had occurred before Banksy became globally famous.

Gunningham's presence in Manhattan appears to have been part of his early travels as a young street artist seeking wider exposure for his work. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he spent periods in New York, staying at the Carlton Arms Hotel, a Manhattan establishment known for hosting artists in exchange for decorating rooms and walls. Banksy painted murals there, including an entire room. Gunningham's transformation into Banksy appears to have unfolded gradually during the 1990s as he moved through the graffiti scene of Bristol, a city known for its street-art culture.

Early acquaintances say he experimented with different signatures before settling on the name, first using variations such as "Robin Banks"—a pun on "robbing banks"—which evolved into Banksy. After his rise to global fame, Gunningham largely disappeared from public records, prompting speculation that he had changed his identity to preserve Banksy's anonymity. Former manager Steve Lazarides told investigators that a legal name change was arranged around 2008, allowing the artist to operate under a new identity while keeping the Banksy persona hidden. REUTERS

China OKs launch of brain-computer interface medical device in world 1st

Hong Kong: China's drug regulator said on Friday that it has given the nod for a brain-computer interface (BCI) system that helps restore hand-movement ability to be sold, the world's first approval of a BCI device for commercial use.

The device is made by Borui Kang Medical Technology (Shanghai) and its tech aims to restore movement and communication to humans suffering from different forms of paralysis. It is designed for patients with quadriplegia caused by cervical spinal cord injuries, helping them regain hand-grasping ability via a glove.

The product is an invasive BCI system, which means electrodes are inserted directly into the brain, instead of sitting on the surface of the brain. The device uses minimally invasive extradural implantation, relying on wireless technology. Eligible patients for the product must be aged 18 to 60. REUTERS

Meta planning layoffs as AI costs mount; workforce could shrink by 20%

New York/San Francisco: Meta is planning sweeping layoffs that could affect 20% or more of the company, sources familiar with the matter said, as Meta seeks to offset costly artificial intelligence infrastructure bets and prepare for greater efficiency brought about by AI-assisted workers.

No date has been set for the cuts and the magnitude has not been finalised, the people said. Top executives have recently signalled the plans to other senior leaders at Meta and told them to begin planning how to pare back, two of the people said.

"This is speculative reporting about theoretical approaches," Meta spokesperson Andy Stone said in response to questions about the plan. If Meta settles on the 20% figure, the layoffs will be the company's most significant since a restructuring in late 2022 and early 2023 that it dubbed the "year of efficiency." As of Dec 31, it had 79,000 employees. REUTERS

CPM members slam G Sudhakaran for 'betraying' party by deciding to contest assembly polls as an independent candidate

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China FDI: Door opens but the Great Wall stays

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

The govt has liberalised Press Note 3, an executive device to kill Chinese investment proposals through unending security scrutiny. But strong constraints remain that will keep Chinese FDI very low. This reveals muddled thinking on both economics and security.

China today has the greatest pool of savings in the world and the best technology in several areas including solar energy, wind energy, electric vehicles, and batteries. To keep out investment from such an important source is an economic self-goal.

Till 2020, most foreign direct investment could enter India with minimal curbs. Press Note 3 was issued in April that year to supposedly prevent India's neighbours (meaning China in practice) from taking over Indian companies in the panic accompanying Covid. Of course, no takeover was ever attempted.

Then, in June, came the Galwan Valley clash between Indian and Chinese troops, killing several Indian soldiers. An enraged Indian public and politicians demanded measures to punish China. Two hundred Chinese apps were banned, including TikTok. Press Note 3 became a way to stop any Chinese investment. Indeed, these were called security threats. This never made sense. Faced with a similar problem, the Biden administration opted for a policy of 'high fence, small yard'. That is, limited areas of legitimate security concern were protected with high fences. But all other areas were kept free of constraints, recognising that these yielded great mutual benefits.

India too should have followed such a policy. Instead, Press Note 3 became 'high fence, every yard'. Great Wall Motor (GWM), a Chinese auto firm, made a billion-dollar investment proposal that would have been welcomed with open arms in any other country but was nixed in India. The same fate befell BYD, the world's biggest electric auto producer and second-biggest battery producer, when it proposed a billion-dollar investment in electric autos and batteries.

Two years ago, Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran noted that India ran a huge trade deficit with China due to its manufacturing overcapacity. Instead of buying from China, he said, India should encourage Chinese firms to produce in India.

The liberalised Press Note now allows companies with less than 10% Chinese investment to enter through the automatic route. More importantly, it mandates a 60-day timeline for clearing investment proposals in sectors such as capital goods, electronic capital goods, electronic components, polysilicon, and ingot-wafer production.

NO ENTRY: Press Note 3 easing doesn't include EV makers like BYD, GWD. Allowing Chinese investment will give us leverage during border problems

That seems like a welcome recognition of the need to attract Chinese investment. However, all such investment will have to be through joint ventures in which Indians have the controlling interest and the Chinese, a minority stake. Ask Indian companies whether they will invest abroad on such terms, and their replies will be unprintable. Do not expect the Chinese to think otherwise. Very limited investment will come in.

That is how it should be, say some foreign policy experts. They see Chinese investment as a security threat, not just in sensitive sectors like telecom but in all sectors, and so want to minimise such inflows.

Really? Look at booming south-east Asian countries and Latin American economies where Chinese investment is welcomed because it brings capital, technology, and participation in global value chains. India needs these too. Other Asian countries (including Chinese foes like Japan and Korea) are now in a free-trade pact (RCEP) dominated by China. They have not allowed their security concerns to kayo the economic value of Chinese trade and investment.

India is the one outlier in this story, where Chinese investment is seen as fundamentally undesirable on security grounds, to be permitted only if the investment is Indian-controlled. Can it be that India is the only wise country, and all the others are fools?

On security grounds alone, India needs a hundred Chinese investments, not a tiny handful. When the Galwan Valley clash occurred in 2020, India banned 200 Chinese apps including TikTok, but their economic significance was tiny. In the future too, border problems may arise, and India needs ways to respond in a calibrated manner that can hurt. If a hundred Chinese companies (including their most celebrated ones) operate in India, that will give India handy levers on which to lean in retaliation. Having virtually no Chinese investment means having virtually no leverage. Far from being a security threat, a hundred Chinese investments will improve India's security.

In sum, the liberalisation of Press Note 3 is a small, inadequate step forward. Of course, India should identify security-sensitive areas and prohibit Chinese entry there. But in non-security-related sectors, Chinese investment should be seen as just as desirable as investment from the US, Europe, or Japan. Something is dreadfully wrong when Chinese firms can more easily enter the US than India. ■

In a new peer-to-peer competition of imperial states, US is trying to be No 1

*Since his debut novel 'Tokyo Cancelled', British Indian writer and essayist **Rana Dasgupta** has won several literary prizes. Many in India will remember him best for 'Capital', for which he spent time in Delhi's plush farmhouses as well as its crowded slums. In his new book, 'After Nations', he turns to an even larger canvas: the history and future of the nation-state. In an interview with **Neelam Raaj**, he talks about why we need new ideas of citizenship*

FOR THE RECORD

Let's start with why you wanted to write this sweeping history of the rise of nation-states. Did the turbulence Trump unleashed have something to do with it?

I began thinking about this in the immediate aftermath of Trump's first election. Modi was PM in India. Brexit was a recent event. France was transfixed by the rise of the far right. I was spending time in all these countries at that time, and all of them felt that the fundamental language of politics they had lived with for several decades was being transformed. I was looking for the common factors. What is it about the system of nation-states that explains these profound changes in individual states? Is it just a coincidence that these changes are happening all at the same time? Or are we actually in a particular moment in the life cycle of states themselves, or of the system of states itself, that explains this? In the years since then, Trump has pushed those changes to a far more intense stage. The question of the nation-state, and where it's taking us, has become more urgent.

While on Trump, does the MAGA movement and his expansionist rhetoric stem from genuine anxieties about America's standing?

A lot of the turbulence being unleashed right now is the result of the fact that America no longer has a supreme hold on the capitalist system or on the accompanying political system. The moments of British and then American superpower dominance relied on a few things. They relied on the unquestioned acceptance of their currencies as the global currency. They relied on their ability to project power over the oceans to ensure the regular flow of resources into the capitalist, industrial system. And they involved the ability to control the legal system by which capitalist transactions happened. On all these fronts, America is losing its supremacy. It is gradually falling to the status that China and Russia have, for instance. It is becoming simply one imperial power among many. And this has very, very big consequences.

One is that America is having to use strategies that Russia and China have been using to maintain its position because it can no longer rely, for instance, on the universality of the dollar. I think Trump sees a window of time when Europe is not a very significant military power, and when China and Russia do not have very significant external political capacities to seize various territorial and strategic advantages. What we're seeing right now in Iran is part of that. The rhetoric about Greenland is part of that. America is trying to ensure that it is the number one player in a new peer-to-peer competition of imperial states.

Across the world, barriers to immigration are coming up. You talk about a universal digital citizenship. What would it look like?

The citizenship system is the most flagrant sign that the nation-state system itself is a class system, dividing the world into groups of people with vastly different rights and freedoms. For at least half the world's population, the nation-state system exists to immobilise them and keep them in place. I talk about a universal digital citizenship as a way to start building a parallel or complementary conception of citizenship—and ultimately of economy and law, too. Not because I have an ultimate blueprint or end goal, but because I think we need to start putting in place systems by which ordinary people can take back control from the nation-state system and begin to organise rights and freedoms for themselves.

There have been countless op-eds on the decline of liberalism. You argue for its redesign. Can you explain?

A lot of my book is about this. In 2026, there is a realisation that the eternal expansion of liberalism is simply not guaranteed. It's become clear that nation-states can function perfectly well as autocracies. They don't need to guarantee rights and freedoms to their populations. Even previously liberal states might decide not to be liberal and withdraw rights and freedoms. They might even withdraw democracy. When I talk about redesign, it's obviously a vast project. But we have to imagine a liberalism that does not rely on nation-states to enforce or guarantee it. By liberalism, I mean the core values the post–French Revolution world has at least paid lip service to: equality, freedom, justice.

Did you interview people to find out whether their relationship to the nation-state has changed? What about Indians?

I didn't formally interview people as there's no way to capture a consensus about these things. But before starting work on this book, my British citizenship dramatically lost value. I was previously a citizen of 27 countries, and then I was a citizen of one. That hugely reduced my mobility, my employment prospects, and my ability to change jurisdiction. As I was writing the book, I realised lots of people were going through something similar. Even Americans—who probably once had the most valuable citizenship in the world—were beginning to feel it wasn't so valuable after all. In Russia, the value of citizenship is objectively rather low, certainly in economic terms, though Putin has tried to inflate it symbolically by promising restoration of old imperial territories.

India is more difficult to generalise about. It has vastly varied regions, classes, and groups with very different experiences. I've spent a lot of time in the Indian countryside in the last couple of years, where many people are suffering terribly, largely as a result of govt policies. But for the top 10% of the population—and the urban population more broadly—India has been very dynamic in recent years. Many people are probably quite happy to be Indian citizens. The value of Indian citizenship has likely increased over the last 30 years. India is also a far more influential actor globally than it once was. In some ways, India is a counterexample to much of what I write about. The Indian state may be becoming more functional rather than less so. The major problem, of course, is inequality. Whether India can deliver the benefits of its growing power to its minorities and especially to its poor remains unclear.

What Landau's candour reveals about the limits and potential of India-US ties

BY INVITATION

HARSH V PANT

At the recent Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, where global powers outlined their strategic priorities, US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau articulated Washington's current foreign policy thinking. His remarks were striking not because they challenged the trajectory of the India-US partnership, but because they revealed the pragmatic, interest-driven logic that now defines it.

Landau's speech reflected a worldview that is increasingly characteristic of contemporary American statecraft: cooperation where interests converge, caution where economic competition could emerge. While he praised India's "limitless potential" and acknowledged it as the world's most populous democracy, he also offered a blunt reminder that strategic goodwill does not translate into economic naivety. "India should understand," he remarked, "that we are not going to make the same mistakes with India that we made with China 20 years ago." The reference was unmistakable. For much of the early 2000s, Washington believed that integrating China into the global economic system would gradually transform its political and strategic behaviour. That assumption was institutionalised when China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. The US opened its markets, encouraged investment flows, and enabled extensive technology transfers. Two decades later, however, American policymakers now interpret that era as a strategic miscalculation—one that facilitated the rise of a formidable economic and geopolitical rival.

Landau's remarks signal a deliberate recalibration in Washington's approach to rising powers. The US is prepared to deepen engagement with India, but it intends to do so with far greater economic caution than it exercised with China. He was careful, however, to reassure his audience that the logic of 'America First' does not equate to American isolationism. Indeed, he emphasised that US-India ties are entering a phase of unprecedented depth. Ongoing negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement reflect this trajectory, alongside cooperation in defence technology, critical minerals, artificial intelligence supply chains, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

The strategic dimension of the partnership remains robust, with India seen as an indispensable partner in managing the evolving balance of power in Asia. Both nations participate actively in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, alongside Japan and Australia, with the objective of promoting a stable Indo-Pacific order. Landau even suggested that the two economies—each projected to approach the $10-trillion mark by the 2030s—could operate as strategic peers in shaping the regional architecture.

Yet economic complexities accompany this strategic convergence. From Washington's perspective, ensuring that economic engagement remains "fair" to American workers and industries is an essential political imperative. This explains the cautious structure of current trade negotiations. What began as a highly punitive tariff proposal has reportedly been moderated under an interim arrangement, but only alongside provisions designed to protect domestic American interests. Underscoring this trend, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) initiated a Section 301 investigation last week into India's trade practices, alongside 59 other economies. This move, coming amid ongoing bilateral trade talks, could complicate negotiations even further.

For India, this introduces a measure of realism into the partnership. It must, therefore, pursue deeper engagement with the US while simultaneously strengthening its own capabilities in manufacturing, research and development, and technology.

At the same time, New Delhi retains considerable leverage. Its demographic scale, expanding consumer market, and deep reservoir of scientific and engineering talent make it an attractive partner for global investors seeking alternatives to China-centric supply chains. Landau's candour may ultimately prove constructive. By clarifying the limits and possibilities of cooperation, it replaces rhetorical idealism with strategic transparency. Both sides understand the stakes: the US seeks a strong India capable of balancing Chinese power, while India values American technology, capital, and strategic support in navigating a contested Indo-Pacific landscape.

This reflects the realities of the 21st-century global order. As it becomes more multipolar, partnerships will increasingly be shaped by interests rather than ideology. While many may have found Landau's remarks unpalatable or even dangerous, they suggest that the India-US relationship has entered a more mature phase, in which priorities intersect across multiple domains but do not fully converge.

The implication should be both empowering and sobering for New Delhi. The country is no longer merely a participant in global geopolitics; it is a central actor whose choices will shape the emerging order. Engagement with the US will remain indispensable, but it will be pursued with the confidence of a nation aware of its own strategic weight. In that balance between partnership and autonomy lies the future trajectory of one of the most consequential relationships of our time. ■

Pant is vice president for Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation

Ghooskhor to Kerala Story, the slippery slope of hurt sentiments

HARD TAKE

ROBIN DAVID

What's in a name? Plenty, as Indian filmmakers are discovering. The producer of 'Ghooskhor Pandat' recently agreed to withdraw the title after the Supreme Court said it would not allow the film's release unless the name was changed because it denigrated one community. But such observations raise some important questions.

Were the makers of 'Ghooskhor Pandat' referring to an entire community or a particular individual when they chose this name? If it was an individual, were they referring to an actual person or an imaginary character? If it referred only to a fictional character as the filmmaker argued, weren't those outraged simply tilting at windmills?

Titles apart, the larger issue is that of denigrating communities. That allegation has also been made against movies like 'The Kerala Story', its recently released sequel and 'The Kashmir Files'. The names of these films are innocuous, but several commentators have flagged the content as being pejorative towards Muslims. Both 'The Kashmir Files' and 'The Kerala Story' reached the courts over their depiction of the Muslim community and were described by some petitioners as harmful propaganda. But the courts rejected these claims on the grounds that the films had been certified by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). Also, the Constitution defends the right to free expression. These are valid arguments for not banning the release of any film in the country.

But by forcing the makers of 'Ghooskhor Pandat' to change the film's name, didn't the honourable judges allow the argument of hurt sentiments to take precedence over freedom of expression? Many will now point out that if the Supreme Court can protect one community's hurt sentiments, it should protect the hurt sentiments of all communities. Besides, they can ask why communities need to be defended only from the titles. Films with denigrating storylines too should not be released until they are changed. And they would be well within their right to make this demand because everyone is equal in the eyes of the law, no matter what caste, creed or religion one belongs to.

The only problem with this argument is that if the courts start protecting all hurt sentiments, there would be no point in having the constitutional right to free speech and expression. One needs the right to express unpleasant ideas, of course with guardrails against deliberately damaging representations, threatening national security, and breaches of public order. If all of us say only sweet and loving things and give each other a 'jaadu ki jhappi', without ever offending anyone, then the right to free speech and expression becomes redundant and would no longer need constitutional protection. As for cinema and art, these would wither away — if not from actual threats, then from self-censorship.

OUTRAGE AGE: 'The Kerala Story' sparked allegations of denigrating a minority community

Perhaps the only way to navigate this minefield of rights and offended sentiments is to not ban any film, no matter which ideology or viewpoint it projects, and let the box office decide its fate. Productions that bomb financially are more likely to send a strong message to the film industry about what people want to watch than any ban by the courts or the govt.

In fact, no matter what new name the makers of 'Ghooskhor Pandat' come up with, the film will most likely be a box-office hit. Because nothing succeeds like a good old-fashioned controversy ahead of the release of a film. There is enough evidence for this phenomenon in the age of outrage and angry protests, both of which can be amplified and turned into national issues with the help of social media. Whether it was 'Padmaavat', 'Pathaan', 'The Kashmir Files' or 'The Kerala Story', the box-office earnings of these movies often rose alongside the outrage they sparked. Just in case our censors don't know, it is called the forbidden fruit effect — when you ban something, you make it more desirable.

This writer even made a conscious attempt to hunt down films like 'Kiss', 'Beef', 'Once Upon a Time in Gaza', and 'All That's Left of You' online after they were not given screening rights at a couple of film festivals. While Varun Grover's 'Kiss' was not shown at the Bhopal film festival, the others were taken down from the Kerala film festival itinerary. And if it bombs even despite the controversies and name changes like 'Billu' (minus barber) and 'Laxmi' (which had to lose the bomb), it's clear that even outrage has its limits. ■

WORD DROP

DOOMSDAY PORN

Countless Hollywood movies have conjured up the fear of a terminal threat to the world from rogue artificial intelligence. However, that fear is no longer limited to the domain of fiction, as AI spreads its influence. From job losses and economic collapse to highly sentient robots possibly being used in wars as killing machines, the worries are gaining traction in

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reports, forums, and online debates. A viral report by Citrini Research, for instance, argues that by 2028, AI could replace a large number of white collar workers, impacting countries' GDP and currencies. While some say such hypothetical scenarios are exaggerated, others are gearing up for their silver-screen style heroic arc.

INBOX

LOSING VALUE

Apropos of 'Bengaluru is stuck...' (Mar 8), we thought our IT firms were invincible as they had many engineers who could write code for cheap. Now, AI can write that same code in seconds, and our companies are losing value fast. We built our success on being the low-cost option, not on being the most innovative. It's backfiring.

—K C Kumar, Bengaluru

Email your letters to the editor at *sunday.times@timesofindia.com* with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

A World Cup win, and why we're still counting seconds on a kiss

BY INVITATION

MOHUA DAS

The night India lifted the T20 World Cup, the field dissolved into the usual delirium of fireworks and woofers pumping out anthems, as wives and girlfriends spilled onto the turf, followed by parents and toddlers waddling in to join the afterparty.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, Hardik Pandya appeared to be having a particularly sprightly time. Which involved a fair amount of on-field garba, some skipping about the turf and a bout of public display of affection — or PDA — with his girlfriend Mahieka, long enough for the social media town square to promptly split into warring camps and unleash an avalanche of memes debating how much PDA is too much PDA.

Some called it "wholesome" and "couple goals", charmed by the love in the air alongside the confetti. Others were rather less impressed and declared it all a bit dramatic, even a bit much — watching the couple lounge on the victory podium — in a breach of the 'gentleman's game'.

The season of PDA, it seems, is upon us and the internet, being the internet, has opinions. Entire Reddit threads have been devoted to the question of whether Hardik ought to have been quite so 'intimate' with his girlfriend.

"Y'all need to chill," shrugged one commenter. Another pointed out with some exasperation that western players hugging their partners rarely summon the same moral thunder. A third observed that in a country where public urination causes less alarm than public kissing, the hierarchy of outrage may perhaps need a rethink.

Over the years, these digital juries have tried to codify PDA. "Anything beyond a hug, peck on the cheek, or holding hands," says a Redditor. Another adopts a grandmother's rule of thumb. "If you wouldn't want your grandmother to see it, keep it to yourself." The measuring rod can get surprisingly technical, too. Hand-holding is widely acceptable. Arms around the waist, borderline. A quick hello-goodbye kiss passes muster. Smooch, however, is red alert. Then there's the four-second rule. "A kiss longer than four seconds begins to make observers self-conscious," someone suggests. My personal favourite is one that doubles as security advice. "If the kiss lasts long enough for someone to steal your wallet, it is probably too long."

What emerges from these social town halls is that the rules of romance in public are oddly elastic. In cinema, lovers prance on khatiyas or engage in high-velocity dhakdhak in the rain. But in real life, couples in parks and beaches are asked to keep two-feet distance. Many of us grew up in homes never seeing our parents hold hands or display affection in public. Because in India, make-believe is fine. Anything more tends to cause palpitations.

And even police cases. Hardik now has one against him in Pune for wrapping the Tricolour around his body and alleged obscene behaviour on the ground. Long before this T20 World Cup win, the nation gasped when a 15-year-old Padmini Kolhapure greeted Prince Charles with a garland and a kiss on his cheek during his visit to Mumbai in 1980. The shocking display of 'westernised' boldness from a young Bollywood star triggered a frenzy.

But the 'gold standard' of Indian PDA scandals arrived in 2007. When Hollywood actor Richard Gere planted one too many kisses on Shilpa Shetty's cheek at an AIDS awareness event in Rajasthan. Effigies were burnt. Legal complaints were filed for "obscenity". It took nearly 15 years for the court to finally clear Shetty of the charges.

KISSA KISS KA: Hardik's on-field celebration has reignited the debate on public displays of affection

Which brings us back to the cricket stadium, which after all, is not exactly a quiet corner of a movie hall. Here, private moments travel in the same stream as match highlights. The WAGs too have changed — the old ones sat in the stands, stylish and watchful. The new ones are on the field post-match, inside the confetti, next to the silverware, in the same camera sweep as the winning team. Fans chuckled when MS Dhoni was recently seen calming an overexcited Sakshi after she prematurely celebrated a wicket. Cameras have also caught Rohit Sharma and wife Ritika bickering on the field like a perfectly normal couple.

New love, however, produces a sort of giddiness that convinces its participants the world has briefly vanished. Something like that was on display with Hardik and Mahieka, and Ishan Kishan with Aditi too. An anxious viewer fretted about the example it might set for his school-going kids watching such brazen affection from their cricketing heroes. A fair concern. Most parental anxieties are. Though one suspects most children were rather more interested in the fireworks and the victory lap.

Some of us are on the more forgiving side of this mosh pit. The team has just won a World Cup, and the players are, for a few minutes, behaving less like 'national treasures' and more like young people deliriously happy. If a cricketer wants to celebrate a career-defining win with his partner in the immediate afterglow, it is hardly the collapse of a civilisation. At its best or worst, it is heroes briefly looking human. So yes, times they are a changin', if only slightly. And if one is still intent on rules, we can perhaps rely on the grandmother test — if she doesn't faint, it's probably fine. ■